

Locke on Free Will and Epistemic Responsibility

Samuel C. Rickless

University of California, San Diego

Abstract

This article summarizes John Locke's considered views on freedom, explaining that freedom is a power of the mind to act in accordance with its volitions, that freedom is a power that can belong only to substances, that we have the freedom to will in many cases, including the power to hold our wills undetermined and thereby suspend the prosecution of our desires. This is a seemingly reasonable account of how our minds work, and should work, when we make (important) decisions. But Locke takes us to be morally responsible and accountable, not just for suspending when it is appropriate, but also for spending our time wisely during suspension, in the proper investigation of what would most conduce to our happiness. The problem is that we are prone to motivated irrationality during suspension when deciding what to investigate and for how long to do so. And thus we need to stop and consider whether we are succumbing to such irrationality before making the ultimate decision. This, I argue, leads to an infinite regress and forces Locke into an unsurmountable dilemma.

Keywords: Locke, Free will, Suspension, Akrasia, Epistemic responsibility.

1. Introduction

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke defends a theory of free will and moral responsibility that he thinks accounts for a number of familiar commonsense intuitions, including the fact that human beings sometimes act akratically (i.e., do something bad or wrong, despite believing or knowing that it is bad or wrong) and the fact that human beings are often morally responsible for the choices they make and the acts they commit despite being under the influence of pressing uneasiness(es) pushing them to so choose and act. Although Locke denies that it is literally or strictly speaking true that a human being's will is free, he does think that human beings are often (though not always) free with respect to their acts of willing, and he thinks that there is something that people are referring to, albeit misleadingly, when they use the phrase "free will". This much, I believe, is well understood, though scholars continue to engage in interpretive

debates regarding the details of Locke's views about the nature of, and interconnection between, freedom, volition, and desire.

It is also understood, though perhaps less often advertised, that Locke's theory of free willing is vulnerable to potentially devastating objections. One such objection concerns an infinite regress produced by the interplay between Locke's theory of freedom and his theory of moral responsibility. Locke recognizes that we are continually beset by uneasinesses (i.e., pains at the lack of absent goods) pushing us in one direction or another: on the one hand, I am uneasy inasmuch as I am thirsty; on the other, I see that there is nothing but sugary drink in the fridge, and I am uneasy at the thought of what drinking sugary stuff will do my health; on the one hand, my cousin has dared me to drink what's in the fridge and I am uneasy at the thought of losing face in front of her; on the other hand, my daughters are worried about my health and I am uneasy at the thought of increasing their worries. As Locke sees it, it is possible for me to keep my will undetermined by even the most pressing uneasiness(es) and thereby give myself time and opportunity to examine all relevant considerations and come to a well-reasoned judgment about what it would be best for me to do all things considered. But keeping one's will undetermined is a matter of suspending one's desires, which is itself an act of will. And it would seem that one is morally responsible for one's actions only if one is morally responsible for, because free with respect to, one's act of suspension (or the lack thereof): for if one is not morally at fault for failing to suspend one's desires, it can hardly be the case that one is morally at fault for the actions that result from the prosecution of those desires. But there are various uneasinesses pressing the will with respect to the act of suspension. If one is morally at fault for failing to suspend, this will be only because one is morally at fault for forbearing to suspend the desire to forbear to suspend. Regress therefore beckons: in order to be morally at fault for any particular action, one has to be morally at fault for an infinite number of instances of suspension failure. This seems counterintuitive.¹

In this article, I would like to raise an additional, and in some ways similar, difficulty for Locke's theory of freedom and moral responsibility. The problem concerns counterintuitive consequences that arise from the interplay between Locke's theory of moral responsibility and the way in which motivated irrationality shapes the epistemic circumstances during episodes of suspension. The worry is that Locke's account of moral responsibility for our decisions and actions can't make sense of our epistemic responsibility during periods of suspension, and that this failure vitiates the account of moral responsibility itself. As far as I am aware, the only way for Locke to surmount this problem is to deny some fairly obvious facts or give up his account of how the will is determined.

2. No Freedom of the Will

I begin with Locke's theory of freedom. The fundamentals of the theory are familiar, but it is necessary to understand the details in order to understand Locke's views on the relation between freedom and moral responsibility.²

¹ See, e.g., Rickless 2014: 110-11.

² For more on Locke's theory of freedom, see Chappell 1994, Yaffe 2000, 2001, Davidson 2003, Glauser 2003, Lowe 2005, LoLordo 2012, Stuart 2013, Rickless 2000, 2014, 2020, Garrett 2015, Leisinger 2017, and Walsh 2018.

Locke claims that the mind has two basic powers, the power to will and the power to perceive (E 2.21.6).³ It is very important to Locke that these powers be understood to belong to the mind, and that they not be hypostatized. Although many of Locke's predecessors often wrote as if these powers belong to homuncular faculties, namely the will and the understanding, Locke seeks to disabuse us of this notion. The will and the understanding, according to Locke, are powers, namely the powers to will and to perceive (see E 2.21.5). These powers belong to the mind, and when the mind exercises them, it wills and it perceives. Properly speaking, it is not, therefore, the will that wills or the understanding that perceives: it is the mind (or person) that does the willing and the perceiving.

Freedom, as Locke explains it, is the power to act (that is, to think or to move one's body) according to the direction or determination of one's own mind (E 2.21.8). Thus, if I am able to do A when I will to do A, and I am able not to do A when I will not to do A, then I am free with respect to action A, whether that action be an action of the mind or an action of the body. Thus, as Locke says, if I am able to remove my contemplation from one idea to another when I will to so remove it, then I am free with respect to the act of idea contemplation removal; and if I am able to move my body from one location to another when I will to so move it, then I am free with respect to this particular act of bodily motion (E 2.21.12). "*Liberty*", Locke writes, is, then, "the power a Man has to do or forbear doing any particular Action, according as its doing or forbearance has the actual preference in the Mind, which is the same thing as to say, according as he himself *wills it*" (E 2.21.15).

Locke's seeming equation of willing with preferring in this latter statement of his account of freedom is, as Locke himself recognizes, an overstatement (almost certainly a suboptimal residue of the first edition of the *Essay*).⁴ As Locke points out, "it is carefully to be remembered, That *Freedom consists in the dependence of the Existence, or not Existence of any Action, upon our Volition of it, and not in the dependence of any Action, or its contrary, on our preference*" (E 2.21.27). The reason to avoid equating willing with preferring is that the term "preferring" is often used to "signify *Desire* as well as *Volition*", but it is important not to confound the will with desire (E 2.21.30). For it is often the case that "the *Will* and *Desire* run counter", as when someone forces me "to use persuasions to another, which at the same time I am speaking, I may wish [i.e., desire] may not prevail on him" (E 2.21.30). Moreover, although "*Preferring* [...]" seems perhaps best to express the Act of *Volition*, [it] does it not precisely. For though a Man would prefer flying to walking, yet who can say he ever *wills it*?" (E 2.21.15). As Locke emphasizes, "*desiring* and *willing* are two distinct Acts of the mind" (E 2.21.30), and this is why it is important to Locke that freedom be identified, not with the ability to do what one desires, but rather with the ability to do what one wills: "In this then consists

³ All references to Locke's *Essay* are to Locke 1975.

⁴ Locke revised the chapter on freedom in the *Essay* several times after its initial publication in 1690. The most significant alterations appeared in the second edition (1694), with a few significant changes also appearing in the fourth edition (1700). In the first edition version of E 2.21, Locke had written, for example, that "*Volition* or *Willing*, regarding only what is in our power, is nothing but the *preferring* the doing of any thing, to the not doing of it; Action to Rest, *et contra*. Well, but what is this *Preferring*? It is nothing but the *being pleased more with the one, than the other*" (E 2.21.28, first edition). I explain below why Locke recognizes this to be a mistake in the second and subsequent editions.

Freedom, (viz.) in our being able to act, or not to act, according as we shall chuse, or *will*" (E 2.21.27).

Freedom, then, is a power. But the will, too, as we have seen, is a power. More particularly, the will is "the *Power* which the mind has, thus to order the consideration of any *Idea*, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versâ* in any particular instance" (E 2.21.5).⁵ And the fact that freedom and the will are both powers, Locke explains, makes it impossible for the will to be free in any straightforward or literal sense. "The Question [*Whether Man's Will be free, or no*] is altogether improper; and it is as insignificant to ask, whether Man's *Will* be free, as to ask, whether his Sleep be Swift, or his Vertue square: *Liberty* being as little applicable to the *Will*, as swiftness of Motion is to Sleep, or squareness to Vertue" (E. 2.21.14). The reason why it makes no sense to say that the will is free is, apparently, that "*Liberty*, which is but a power, belongs only to Agents, and cannot be an attribute or modification of the *Will*, which is also but a Power" (E 2.21.14). Powers, then, it seems, cannot belong to powers, but only to agents; and since the will is not an agent, it makes no sense to say that it is free, or, for that matter, unfree.

The claim that powers can belong only to agents is not consistent with other claims Locke makes about powers, and, in truth, I think that Locke does not accept it. In numerous places in the *Essay*, Locke tells us that bodies of various kinds have powers of various kinds. Thus, for example, "Fire has a *power* to melt Gold" and "Gold has a *power* to be melted"; "the Sun has a *power* to blanch Wax, and Wax a *power* to be blanched by the Sun" (E 2.21.1—see also E 2.8.23); the "*Loadstone* [has] the power of drawing Iron" (E 2.23.7); and "Yellowness [...] is a Power in Gold, to produce that *Idea* in us by our Eyes, when placed in a due Light" (E 2.23.10). But the sun, wax, magnets, and gold are not *agents*: agents have the power of performing *actions*, but the sun, wax, etc. cannot perform *actions*. This is because actions require "the determination of the *Will*", this being the reason Locke gives for counting forbearances to act as actions (E 2.21.28).

It is not, then, that powers belong only to agents. But something in the vicinity is true, and this is that "*Powers* [...] are *Attributes* only of *Substances*" (E 2.21.16). Thus, says Locke, to ask "whether the *Will be free*, is in effect to ask, whether the *Will* be a Substance" (E 2.21.16). And the real problem, then, is not that the will is not an *agent*, but rather that the will is not a *substance*. This is because the will is a power, and "*Powers* are *Relations*" (E 2.21.19). Locke is here relying on his basic ontology: the world as he understands it is divided into three main categories of entities, namely, substances, modes, and relations. Substances, on this view, are "distinct particular things subsisting by themselves", that is, entities that do not depend for their existence on the existence of other things (E 2.12.6); modes are "Dependences on, or Affections of, Substances" (E 2.12.4); and relations are dependences on at least two things (E 2.25.6). Thus, given the exclusive nature of Locke's categorization, it follows directly from the fact that powers are relations that powers are not substances, and hence cannot themselves possess powers if substances are the only kinds of things that can possess powers. And therefore, if the will is a power, then, given that freedom too is a power, the will cannot (literally) be free.

⁵ Again, the use of the word "prefer" in the second clause here is inapposite: the will is not the power to *desire* that one's body move or rest, but rather the power of "commanding the doing or not doing such or such particular action" (E 2.21.5).

There is not a little irony in the fact that the ontological categorization of things into substances, modes, and relations that grounds Locke's claim that there is no such thing as (literal) freedom of the will is something that Locke elsewhere describes as philosophically unhelpful. In a revealing section of the *Essay*, Locke considers the question whether empty space (i.e., space that is devoid of body) is a substance or an accident (i.e., a mode). His answer is that the ideas of substance and accident are neither clear enough nor distinct enough to decide the question (E 2.13.17-20). Indeed, because "we have no *Idea* of what [substance] is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does" (E 2.13.19), Locke expresses thoroughgoing scepticism regarding the usefulness of "the Doctrine of *Substance and Accidents*" when it comes to the "deciding of Questions in Philosophy" (E 2.13.20). And yet, in the chapter on power and freedom, Locke finds himself telling us that the doctrine of substance and relation (which is tightly connected to the doctrine of substance and accident) establishes, in no uncertain terms, that the will cannot be (literally) free. This strikes me as a fairly important philosophical result, indeed one that Locke himself makes much of, expostulating for several sections about the various sillinesses that fall to the lot of those who claim that the will is free because they (as Locke argues, illegitimately) reify the will and treat it as if it were a substance (E 2.21.14-20). And hence the doctrine of substance and accident Locke much maligns leads to consequences for his theory of freedom of will that are more significant than he is elsewhere willing to allow.

3. Free Willing

Having established that there is no such (literal) thing as freedom of the will, Locke turns his attention to the question of whether human beings are free with respect to their *volitions*, i.e., acts of will or, better, individual exercises of the will. Even if my will isn't free, am I not free to will as I please? Locke finds this question ambiguous, and divides it into two separate questions. The first is whether there are any circumstances in which *willing one way or another* is something that one is unable, and hence not free, to avoid. The second is whether there are any circumstances in which *willing to do such-and-such* is something that one is unable, and hence not free, to avoid. There is significant scholarly debate on how Locke answers both of these questions, and I do not propose to repeat the details here. But, relying on past work on the subject, I will now summarize what I take Locke's answers to be, because they set the stage for discussion of one of the central topics of this essay, namely Locke's doctrine of suspension.⁶

Regarding the first question, Locke's answer is that it is sometimes impossible for someone to avoid willing, one way or the other, with respect to a course of action or its opposite. This happens when one is currently engaged in a process and comes to consider, for whatever reason, whether to continue or to stop the process. Locke asks whether "a Man that is walking, to whom it is proposed to give off walking" is "at liberty, whether he *will* determine himself to walk, to give off walking, or no" (E 2.21.24) and his answer to this question is emphatically no. In this sort of case, says Locke, "[t]he Mind has not a power to forbear *willing*", and hence "has not a power to act, or not to act, wherein consists Liberty" (E 2.21.24). If the man is walking and, as he is walking considers whether to continue

⁶ For discussions of Locke on the freedom *to* will, see, in particular, Chappell 1994, Rickless 2000, 2014, 2020, and Garrett 2015.

or to stop walking, he cannot avoid willing one way or the other. The reason Locke gives for this is simple: one of the two options, stopping or continuing, “must necessarily follow; and that which does follow, follows by the choice and determination of his Mind, that is, by his *willing* it” (E 2.21.23): thus, if the man continues to walk, it is only because he wills to continue walking, and if the man stops walking, it is only because he wills to stop walking. Either way, whether he continues or stops the process in which he is engaged, the man has no choice but to will. He is, then, in this sort of circumstance, unfree with respect to willing one way or the other.

Regarding the second question, Locke’s answer is that it is not merely true but *obvious* that the answer is yes. For remember what freedom is: to be free with respect to an action, whether an action of mind or action of body, is to be able to perform the action if one wills to do so, and to be able not to perform the action if one wills not to do so. Thus, “a Man falling into the Water, (a Bridge breaking under him,) has not liberty, is not a free Agent”, for “though he prefers his not falling to falling; yet the forbearance of that Motion [is not] in his Power” (E 2.21.9). Whereas “a Man standing on a cliff, is at liberty to leap twenty yards downwards into the Sea [...] because he has the power to leap, or not to leap” (E 2.21.27). And “a close Prisoner, in a Room twenty foot-square, being at the North-side of his Chamber, is at liberty to walk twenty foot Southward, because he can walk, or not walk it: But is not, at the same time, at liberty, to [...] walk twenty foot Northward” (E 2.21.27). This account of freedom (and unfreedom) is perfectly general. Consider, now, not whether you are free to A, but whether you are free to *will* to A (where A is some particular action). To be free with respect to that particular act of willing to A is to be able to will to A if one wills to will to A, and also to be able not to will to A if one wills not to will to A. But Locke assumes that willing to will to A is the same as willing to A, and willing not to will to A is the same as not willing to A. And thus, to ask whether one is able to will to A if one wills to will to A is just to ask whether one is able to will to A if one wills to A; and to ask whether one is able to will not to will to A if one wills not to will to A is just to ask whether one is able not to will to A if one doesn’t will to A. It is, in other words, to ask “whether a Man can *will*, what he *wills*; or be pleased with what he is pleased with” (E 2.21.25). This is a question that “needs no answer”, because the answer to it is obvious, indeed, obviously in the affirmative: *of course* a man can do what he does, *of course* a man can be pleased with what pleases him. Actuality, as a matter of course, entails possibility. Thus, if one wills to A, then one is able to will to A; and if one does not will to A, then one is able not to will to A. Locke concludes that, no matter the circumstances, each one of us is free with respect to any particular act of willing to do such-and-such.

The fact that Locke answers both questions differently explains why he takes pains to distinguish them. Whereas it is always the case that we are free with respect to the act of willing to do such-and-such, it is not always the case that we are free with respect to the act of willing one way or another: indeed, when we are in the middle of engaging in a particular process (e.g., making breakfast, walking to the store, cleaning the dishes, reading a book), we do not have the ability to avoid willing; we must either will that the process continue or that the process cease. As Locke emphasizes, our unfreedom with respect to willing one way or the other occurs in “the far greater number” of circumstances (E 2.21.24). But there are cases in which we are able to avoid exercising our wills, namely,

circumstances in which it is proposed whether to do (or not do) something, initiate or not initiate a course of action, in the near or distant future. Thus, if, while at lunch today, I am considering whether to make coffee or tea at breakfast tomorrow morning, I have the ability *not* to make a decision now about which drink to make tomorrow: that is, I can defer making a decision, one way or the other, and thereby fail to exercise my will. In such a case, I *do* have freedom with respect to willing one way or the other, and this is because the action I am considering is not the continuation or stopping of a process in which I am currently engaged, but rather the initiation and completion of a process that will happen at some future time.

Locke is well aware that, at the time when we consider whether to perform some particular action in the future, we are seldom free “from the sollicitation of our natural or adopted desires” (E 2.21.45). Indeed, whenever we are considering what to do, there are “in us a great many uneasinesses always solliciting, and ready to determine the *will*”, and that “the greatest, and most pressing” of these “for the most part” fixes what we will do (E 2.21.47). It is “*uneasiness* alone operates on the *will*” (E 2.21.36) and “determines the *Will* to the successive voluntary actions, whereof the greatest part of our Lives is made up” (E 2.21.33).⁷ The uneasiness of desire is a pain “for want of some absent good” (E 2.21.31), and it is only when we feel this kind of want that we are motivated to act (E 2.21.33-39). But Locke insists that, except for unusual circumstances (such as when we face “pains of the Body from want, disease, or outward injuries, as the rack, *etc.* which when present, and violent, operate for the most part forcibly on the *will*”—E 2.21.57), “the mind [has] a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires” (E 2.21.47), including even its greatest and most pressing desire, and “keep it from determining the *will*, and engaging us in action” (E 2.21.50). The thesis that we human beings have this power, and that we can exercise it in most cases when we are considering whether or not to perform some particular future action, has come to be known as the doctrine of suspension.

4. Suspension and “Free Will”

What Locke writes about the doctrine of suspension has puzzled commentators, because it suggests that Locke’s views on freedom are inconsistent. As I have previously argued, the perceived inconsistency is the result of misinterpretation.⁸ Let me see if I can clarify matters further here.

First, what is it to “suspend the execution and satisfaction” of one’s desires? Is it an action that follows upon an exercise of the will, or is it a passive occurrence that happens to the mind without its having willed it? The answer is, fairly clearly, that suspension is a *voluntary action*, rather than an unwilled happening. There are several reasons for this.

First, there is the language that Locke elsewhere uses to describe the power to suspend: it is, he says, the power to keep [any particular desire] from determining the *will*, the power of “*standing still*, where we are not sufficiently assured of the way” (E 2.21.50); it is the power to “stop [men’s desires] from determining their *wills* to any action, [the power] to hold [their] *wills* undetermined” (E

⁷ This is not the view proposed in the first edition of the *Essay*. In E 2.21.29 of the first edition, Locke had written that “*the greater Good is that alone which determines the Will*”.

⁸ See Rickless 2000, 2014, 2020.

2.21.52). To suspend is to “govern [one’s] Passions” and “hinder them from breaking out, and carrying [one] into action” (E 2.21.53); it is to “suspend [i.e., prevent] the act of [one’s] choice from being determined for or against the thing proposed” (E 2.21.56). To suspend, he says, is to “hinder blind Precipitancy; [...] to stand still” (E 2.21.67). In real life, standing still, stopping, holding, keeping, and hindering all require *effort*. To stand still is to hold one’s limbs steady and prevent them from moving. (Effort is not required to prevent the motion of one’s body when one is lying down on a comfortable surface, but it is definitely required when *standing*.) To stop or hinder or keep someone from doing something, to hold them back, is to command one’s body to act in certain ways, and hence involves volition. The case of the mind, in the matter of preventing one’s desires from determining one’s will, is not different from the case of the body: this sort of prevention too requires effort and will.

Second, there is one clear textual reference that presupposes that the act of suspension is (or, at least, can be) voluntary. Locke writes: “Nor let any one say, he cannot govern his Passions, nor hinder them from breaking out, and carrying him into action; for what he can do before a Prince, or a great Man, he can do alone, or in the presence of God, *if he will*” (emphasis added—E 2.21.53). What Locke is saying here is that if we are able to suspend the prosecution of our desires in the presence of superiors, then we are able to so suspend when we are alone, if we will to do so. Suspension, then, is the sort of activity that is subject to one’s will.

And finally, Locke draws a close connection between one’s failure to suspend and one’s susceptibility to moral censure and punishment. “[F]rom the not using of [the power of suspension] right”, Locke writes, “comes all that variety of mistakes, errors, and *faults* which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness” (emphasis added—E 2.21.47). In particular, the failure to suspend often results in a “too hasty choice of [one’s] own making” and the imposition on oneself of “wrong measures of good and evil”, and “the miscarriages that follow on it, must be imputed to [one’s] own election”. It is for these reasons that “a Man may justly incur punishment, though it be certain that in all the particular actions that he *wills*, he does, and necessarily does will that, which he then judges to be good” (E 2.21.56). Thus, forbearing to suspend when suspension is called for is something for which we may be legitimately blamed or punished. But, as Locke would surely recognize, if the failure to suspend were something that merely happens to us, without being under the control of our wills, then blame and punishment would be inapposite.⁹

The problem that the doctrine of suspension poses for Locke’s theory of freedom is that what Locke says about the former appears to contradict the latter. Locke claims, in a variety of passages scattered over several sections of the chapter on power, that liberty “lies in” the power to suspend (E 2.21.47), that this power is “the source of all liberty” (E 2.21.47), “the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings in their constant endeavours after, and a steady prosecution of true felicity” (E 2.21.52), and “the great inlet, and exercise of all the *liberty* Men have, are capable of, or can be useful to them” (E 2.21.52). These passages suggest that the true liberty of human beings *consists in* the power to suspend, i.e., the power to hold their wills undetermined by their desires, and this appears to contradict Locke’s standard and oft-repeated view that liberty (or freedom) consists

⁹ For a defense of the contrary view, see Walsh 2014.

in the power to do (and not do) as one wills. Consider, for example, someone who is able to walk if she wills to walk and who is able not to walk if she wills not to walk, but who is, for whatever reason, unable to suspend her desire to walk (or her desire not to walk). According to Locke's official account of the nature of freedom as freedom of action, this person is free; but according to the claim that freedom consists in the power to suspend, she is not free.

If suspending (and, in many cases, the failure to suspend) is the act of holding one's will undetermined, then the ability or power to suspend is the ability or power to hold one's will undetermined. And this, of course, raises the question of whether one has the power to hold (or not hold) one's will undetermined, *if one so wills*. In many cases (not including such extreme circumstances as mental torture), Locke's view is that we can suspend if we will to suspend, and we can fail to suspend if we will not to suspend. According to Locke's overarching definition of freedom, then, we (usually) have freedom with respect to the (mental) act of suspension. The power to suspend (or not suspend) as one wills is therefore a *particular instance or type* of freedom of action, as applied to the mental act of suspension. Locke's view, encapsulated in the somewhat awkward terminology of "source", "hinge", and "inlet", is that this very particular *kind* of freedom is more important than any other. I have the power to lift or not lift my finger if I will, the power to think about philosophy if I will, the power to vote if I will, the power to conjure memories of my childhood if I will. But none of these powers is as critical to my happiness as the power to suspend my desires. For the power to suspend, he says, was "given" to every human being (presumably by God), "[so] that he might examine, and take care of his own Happiness, and look that he were not deceived" (E 2.21.56). The reason is that, as Locke repeatedly says, suspending has a *point* or *purpose*, which is to create the opportunity "to consider the objects of [one's] desires"; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others" (E 2.21.47), in such a way as to "inform [oneself], whether that particular thing, which is then proposed, or desired, lie in the way to [one's] main end, and make a real part of that which is [one's] greatest good" (E 2.21.52). If human beings did not have the power to suspend, they would be at the mercy of their most pressing uneasinesses, very few of which are self-developed or self-created, and, for a variety of reasons relating to the imperfection of their will and judgment, would fall into misery and evil. The fact that we have the freedom to walk and think about philosophy is a happy by-product of the fact that we have the freedom to act more generally; but the reason why we have freedom of action at all, conjectures Locke, is that it makes possible for us the power to suspend, without which we would be miserable. It is for this reason, I think, that Locke tells us that the power to suspend is "the great inlet, and exercise of all the *liberty* Men have, are capable of, or can be useful to them, and that whereon depends the turn of their actions" (E 2.21.52).

There is therefore no inconsistency at the heart of Locke's theory of freedom. Freedom, for Locke, is freedom of action: the ability to do or not do as one wills. Because suspending the prosecution of one's desires is an action, it makes sense to ask whether we are free with respect to that particular type of action. And in most cases, Locke says, we have the freedom to suspend, i.e., the power to suspend or not suspend as we will. As Locke sees it, this freedom to suspend matters more to our felicity than freedom with respect to any other sort of action, because it is guaranteed that, given our various imperfections, we would be miserable and deprived without it. It is for this reason that Locke describes the power of suspension as the "source of all liberty", and as "that, which is (as I think improperly)

call'd *Free will*" (E 2.21.47). As he has already argued, it makes no sense to say that our wills are free, but it *does*, he thinks, make sense to say that we have a particularly important liberty, namely the liberty to hold our wills undetermined, and it is this particular liberty that those who discourse on "free will" and its practical and theoretical importance really (do and should) care about.

5. Akrasia, Moral Responsibility, and Epistemic Duties

I have already said that Locke takes us to be subject to justified blame and punishment if we misuse our power of suspension. How, and under what sorts of circumstances, might this power be misused?

Locke's view of human beings is that they are unmotivated to change their current circumstances unless they find themselves uneasy at the lack of some absent good. Thus, if our needs and wants are met and we are not beset by uneasiness, then we will not lift a finger. But once uneasiness crops up, we are motivated to remove it inasmuch as we judge it to be incompatible with our happiness. This is how we find ourselves looking for food and drink, and then eating and drinking, as a way of removing the uneasinesses of hunger and thirst. Under many ordinary circumstances, there is nothing pathological about any of this activity.

But sometimes we are beset by some pressing uneasiness that threatens to determine our wills to some foolish or evil activity, and it is when facing these sorts of circumstances that it is crucial for us to exercise the power of suspension. The most notable of these forms of practical irrationality is akrasia, or weakness of will, which is when one chooses (and does) something that one knows or believes to be bad, in the belief that it is bad. Locke describes a "Drunkard" who is beset by "*uneasiness* to miss his Companions" and experiences a "habitual thirst after his Cups [that] drives him to the Tavern", even while he recognizes that further inebriation threatens "the loss of health and plenty, and perhaps the joys of another life" (E 2.21.35). On Locke's view, we are justified in blaming (and God would be justified in punishing) the drunkard, not because he experiences a pressing uneasiness to do something bad (to himself or others), but because he forbears to exercise the power to suspend the desire to meet his friends and drink with them at the tavern. Like most people under most circumstances, the drunkard need not immediately choose to pursue the goods at the lack of which he is uneasy. He can hold his will undetermined, and thereby prevent formation of the volition to join his friends at the pub. During this time, says Locke, he has a further power that it is also important for him to exercise if he desires happiness, as all human beings do (E 2.21.54, E 2.21.57, E 2.21.68). This is the power to consider the consequences, the advantages and disadvantages, of (habitually) drinking alcoholic beverages at taverns. If the drunkard exercises the power of suspension without exercising his powers of empirical investigation and ratiocination, he will end up in exactly the position he found himself in at the time he initiated suspension. But if he exercises these latter powers as he should, he will discover just how bad it is for his pocketbook to purchase drinks in taverns and how bad it is for his health to consume excessive amounts of alcohol. Although he might believe, and even know, that it would be better for him to avoid the tavern, he might not be in a position to judge that avoidance of the tavern forms a necessary part of his (long-term) well-being until careful consideration of the evils of paying for and imbibing large quantities of alcoholic drinks lead him to experience an uneasiness that is even more pressing than the original uneasiness at the idea of

missing the pleasure of spending time and drinking with his friends. Indeed, the entire purpose of “examination” or “consideration” during the period of suspension is to “raise desire”, a proportionate uneasiness at the thought of the bad results of repeated inebriation and loss of means, sufficient to counteract the initially more pressing uneasiness at the thought of missing the pleasures of the pub (E 2.21.56). And if mere consideration is not sufficient in some cases, then “practice, application, and custom” can contribute to raising countervailing desires “in most” (E 2.21.69).

It should be noted that the drunkard’s choice situation, even after he acquires a mountain of information about the effects of alcohol on his metabolism and the price of alcoholic drinks relative to his assets and liabilities, is perhaps not as obvious as Locke makes it out to be (unless it is supposed that, say, a single instance of alcohol consumption is forbidden, say, by God). The drunkard knows that if he goes to the tavern, he is likely to spend a certain amount of money and imbibe a certain amount of alcohol before making his way home. But, unless he is pennurious, going to the tavern once will not bankrupt him, and, unless he is right on the edge of contracting cirrhosis or pancreatitis or any of a number of bodily dysfunctions caused by excessive alcohol ingestion, he will not suffer greatly by going to the tavern that evening, except perhaps for a serious headache (and the consequences thereof) the next morning. Even after collating and processing all of the available information that could be relevant to the decision whether to go to the tavern, it should not be obvious to the drunkard that the consequences of going are worse on the whole than the consequences of forbearing to go. This is all consistent with the drunkard recognizing that a course of *repeated visits to the tavern* over a relatively short period of time will likely cause significant financial hardship as well as serious damage to his health. So, perhaps it might have been better for Locke to have chosen a somewhat different example, such as the case of a man who gets a serious thrill from a kind of dangerous activity that has a relatively high probability of leading to his death. Even if he understands how high the probability of death is, his most pressing desire may be to engage in the activity. But if he suspends this desire and then thinks carefully about the probabilities (and perhaps of the consequences of his death for his family and friends), the thinking process during suspension may “raise” a countervailing desire that becomes more pressing and determines his will to forbear from engaging in the activity.

Possession of the power of suspension, as we have seen, is what makes human beings susceptible to moral criticism (and punishment, at least by God) when they misuse it or fail to exercise it when they should. But it should be clear that suspension of one’s desires is not, by itself, sufficient to absolve one of moral blame or censure. This is because we have more specifically epistemic duties to discharge during the period of suspension, in addition to the duty to work on ourselves through consideration and practice to raise desires for goods that really are necessary for our happiness: the duty to seek and gather evidence on both sides of the question, the duty to analyze the evidence and thereby determine the probability of such-and-such consequence occurring if so-and-so action is taken and the total amount and intensity of goodness or badness represented by each consequence, and then the duty to form a considered judgment on the basis of this analysis. If one merely suspends without discharging one’s epistemic duties during suspension, then one has failed to do as one should and one is subject to just as much blame and censure as would have been appropriate if one had chosen not to suspend to begin with.

The cases of the drunkard and the thrill-seeker may not bring our epistemic duties into high relief, because there is a sense in which both of these individuals already know many things that are relevant to their decisions. So, consider a philosopher, Sally, who recently earned her Ph.D., has applied widely for a job, and is fortunate enough to receive two job offers. One position is at a small, prestigious, but somewhat geographically isolated liberal arts college. The other position is at a large, less prestigious university in a cosmopolitan city that serves as an airline hub. We may imagine that Sally loves both research and teaching, but perhaps enjoys research a bit more than she enjoys teaching. At the same time, the liberal arts college is her alma mater, and she has positive memories of her undergraduate experience there. What should Sally do? Well, she could consult her uneasinesses and go with the one that happens right now to be the most pressing. Perhaps that uneasiness is the thought of missing out on being back in her comfortable undergraduate environment. Or she could hold her will undetermined and do some research. She might discover, for example, that her alma mater made some poor financial decisions that resulted in a diminution of its endowment, and that the faculty who would be her future colleagues are disaffected. And she might discover that the less prestigious university is very well run, that the instructors who would be her future colleagues there are effective and dedicated teachers, and that she would fit seamlessly into the department's plan for future development. At that point, Sally might feel an uneasiness at the thought of missing out on the opportunities that would likely be available at the larger university, an uneasiness that might be greater than her original uneasiness at the thought of missing out on a return to her alma mater. If our philosopher suspends her present desires but doesn't even attempt to find out more about what life would be like at each institution, she would be blameable for failing to gather and analyze the data that would point her to the better alternative.

6. The Problem

So far, what Locke says appears to make a good deal of sense. It appears psychologically respectable as well as morally insightful. Human beings are very occasionally impulsive and sometimes unable to avoid willing (such as when they are on the rack), but, more often than not, they are able to take a step back before making a choice, gather evidence, analyze it, and come up with a more carefully wrought decision. But matters are more complex than Locke recognizes, and the interaction of various factors of which he is aware poses a serious problem for his accounts of freedom, suspension, and moral responsibility. I have already mentioned the problem of infinite regress. But there is another, potentially even more serious problem, in the offing.

Suppose Sally is trying to decide which of the two job offers to accept. Following Locke's strictures, she has not impulsively decided in accordance with her most pressing initial uneasiness (related to her affection for her alma mater) but has exercised her power of suspension and is currently holding her will undetermined. In addition, she has decided to look more carefully at both options and gather evidence that will help her form a more considered judgment, thereby either deepening her former uneasiness or raising a new and more pressing uneasiness to counteract the former. But how much evidence should she gather?

Sally has, let us say, a limited amount of time in which to make her decision. If she waits too long, she will forgo both job opportunities, each of which clearly

ranks higher than her current situation. But, of the time she has available, she could spend more or less time gathering relevant information. Suppose she discovers, by reading the Chronicle of Higher Education, that the endowment of her alma mater (call it “AM”) has suffered a loss that is well short of catastrophic. A mutual friend has told her that the instructors in the philosophy department at AM are disaffected, but then, in discussions with each of them, she discovers that there are reasonable explanations for their current disaffection, and that there are reasons to think that the disaffection will be short-lived. There are too many instructors at the larger university (call it “LU”) for Sally to talk with them all. The conversations she has had with them have been pleasant but relatively short, and, for understandable reasons, none of them has been particularly forthcoming about personal or professional challenges. Should Sally continue gathering information, or stop?

Suppose Sally is really attached to AM. She remembers her time there with great fondness. During her years there as an undergraduate, the students were well-supported and the instructors decently remunerated. The location is geographically isolated, but there were compensating advantages, such as opportunities for communing with nature and making close friends in a small town. So, Sally stops her investigation and now consults her levels of uneasiness at the thought of not joining AM and at the thought of not joining LU, allows her current most pressing uneasiness to determine her will, and decides to accept the offer from AM. According to Locke, it appears that Sally has done her duty: counteracting her initial desires, she postponed making a decision, gathered relevant information, analyzed it, and only then allowed her levels of uneasiness to fix her choice.

And yet all, we may suppose, is not so rosy. The question whether to gather more evidence can only be answered by an act of will. There is, we may reasonably suppose, uneasiness at the thought of gathering more evidence, but also uneasiness at the thought of failing to gather more evidence. It is possible for the decision whether or not to gather more evidence to be determined by the most pressing current uneasiness or to be postponed by suspending the execution and satisfaction of one’s present desires. Perhaps the degree of Sally’s attachment to AM is influencing the current balance of uneasiness at the thought of gathering more information. Locke himself recognizes that “*when we compare present Pleasure or Pain with future, [...] we often make wrong Judgments of them*”, because “[o]bjects, near our view, are apt to be thought greater, than those of a larger size, that are more remote” (E 2.21.63). So, perhaps Sally’s judgment that she has gathered enough information is being distorted by her attachment to AM, in ways of which she is not currently aware, just as judgments of the relative size of present pleasures and future pains are unconsciously distorted by “*the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds*” (E 2.21.64).

It seems, then, that, faced with the question of whether to stop gathering information, Sally should suspend her desire to answer that question in order to consider whether this desire is being influenced in potentially distorting ways by her attachment to AM. If she doesn’t suspend the desire to decide whether to stop gathering information and simply allows her present balance of uneasinesses to determine her will with respect to the question, then she will stop gathering information, thereby putting her in a position of deciding whether to accept AM’s offer on what may well be an inadequate evidentiary basis. So, on the one hand, by suspending her desires and gathering evidence relevant to deciding which job

offer to accept before making her decision on the basis of the evidence, Sally has discharged her duty. But, on the other hand, by failing to consider whether her decision to stop gathering evidence is subject to motivated irrationality, Sally has done wrong.

One might think that Sally has a way out, one that requires only the smallest of tweaks to Locke's conception of what is required to fulfill one's epistemic duties during the time that one's desires are suspended. Before deciding whether to stop gathering evidence, Sally can suspend her desires on this matter in order to determine whether it is best, on the whole, for her to stop gathering evidence. During *this* period of suspension, Sally can investigate whether her desire to stop gathering evidence is being unduly influenced by her attachment to AM. If the result of that investigation is that she has been unduly influenced, then she should decide to counteract her attachment and continue gathering evidence relevant to deciding which job offer to accept. But if the result of that investigation is that she has *not* been unduly influenced, then she should stop gathering evidence and decide which job offer to accept on the basis of the evidence she has already gathered.

Unfortunately, matters are not so simple. Suppose Sally is now investigating whether her attachment to AM is distorting her judgment about whether to stop gathering evidence regarding which job offer to accept. That investigation, too, requires the gathering of evidence. For example, Sally could ask herself whether strong attachments of various kinds have had an irrational influence on some of her past decisions. She could talk to her friends and relatives about whether they think of her attachment to AM as excessive and unjustified. She could consult with her therapist about whether she has overly romanticized past relationships with students and faculty at AM during her undergraduate years. Suppose Sally has gathered some evidence (on the question of whether her attachment to AM is distorting her judgment about whether to stop gathering evidence relevant to the decision of which job offer to accept), but she recognizes that she could also gather more. What should she do? Keep gathering evidence, or stop?

And now, I hope, we can see the nature of the problem. The decision to continue or stop gathering evidence about the effects of her AM-attachment on her decision to stop or continue gathering evidence relevant to another decision will be the result of an act of will that is ordinarily determined by the balance of uneasinesses concerning the options between which she is deciding. But perhaps the most pressing of *those* uneasinesses is the result of some factor that threatens to have a distorting influence on her judgment. So, Sally might be well-advised to hold her will undetermined at this point, in order to gather evidence that is relevant to the question of whether some emotional factor is irrationally affecting her desire to stop gathering evidence about the effects of her attachment to AM on her desire to stop gathering evidence about which job offer to accept. But there is no principled end to this process. It would seem that, in order to discharge her epistemic duties, Sally must continue investigating, at an unending series of levels, whether her decision to stop or continue gathering evidence regarding some decision or other is being unduly influenced by some psychological factor of which she may be currently unaware. But this is impossible. Sally must, in fact, stop gathering evidence at some point and make a decision. And yet the decision to stop investigating, at whatever level it occurs, is going to be unavoidably arbitrary and subject to criticism.

The result of all this is that Locke is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, he can say that once Sally has suspended at the first level and conducted some sort of investigation, no matter how curtailed, in advance of making her decision, then she has done all that could reasonably be expected of her. But this is counterintuitive. On the other hand, he can say that, once Sally has suspended at the first level, she should gather evidence up to a point that is determined by an investigation into whether she should stop or continue gathering evidence, which involves gathering evidence up to a point that is determined by an investigation into whether she should stop or continue gathering evidence, and so on, *ad infinitum*. But this, of course, is impossible.

The problem, as I see it, is generalizable to all circumstances in which decisions are called for in life, except perhaps the most trivial. The nub of it is that the discharging of our duties regarding the decisions we need to make is not limited to the suspension of desire. If suspension of desire were all that was required to discharge our decisional duties, then the problem would be avoided: when faced with a decision one should suspend desire and use reason to determine which decision would be best, at which point one should cease suspending and make the decision. Locke often writes as if matters were this simple. He describes the process of examination during suspension as “consulting a guide”, and “the determination of the will upon enquiry” as “following the direction of that Guide” (E 2.21.50). But, of course, there is no *literal* guide, and there is no manual for how to make decisions in life. Occasionally, Locke suggests that the matter may be more complex. Thus, he tells us that human beings should suspend their desires “till they have duly and fairly *examin’d* the good and evil of it, as far forth as the weight of the thing requires”. “This”, he writes, “we are able to do; and when we have done it, we have done our duty, and all that is in our power; and indeed all that needs” (E 2.21.52). But, of course, there is no manual or objective measuring stick by which to determine whether one’s examination has been “due” or “fair” or what level of investigation is proportional to the “weight of the thing”. The most, perhaps, that can be said is that, other things equal, matters of less moment require less, whereas matters of greater moment require more, in the way of investigation. But that, by itself, does not diminish or erase the problem that I have attempted to elucidate.

Apart from the fact that our duties extend not merely to the suspension of desire but also to the gathering and analysis of evidence, there is also the fact that *every* decision, including the decision whether to stop or continue gathering evidence, results from the balance of various uneasinesses that could be influenced by irrational emotions or beliefs, unless the desires fed by those uneasinesses are suspended. Thus, the only way for Locke to escape the problem I have described would be to (i) deny that our duties extend past suspension (and perhaps some degree of examination during suspension), (ii) insist that there is a simple or objective way of determining the appropriate extent of examination during suspension, or (iii) deny that the decision whether to continue or stop examination is usually determined by the most pressing uneasiness, unless the desire corresponding to that uneasiness is suspended. But (i) involves a significant moral mistake, (ii) involves a significant factual error, and (iii) involves giving up a central plank of Locke’s (second edition) theory of how the will is determined. To my mind, Locke is well and truly caught.

References

- Chappell, V. 1994, "Locke on the Freedom of the Will", in Rogers, G.A.J. (ed.), *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 101-21.
- Davidson, J.D. 2003, "Locke's Finely Spun Liberty", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 33, 203-27.
- Garrett, D. 2015, "Liberty and Suspension in Locke's Theory of the Will", in Stuart, M. (ed.), *A Companion to Locke*, Oxford: Blackwell, 260-78.
- Glauser, R. 2003, "Thinking and Willing in Locke's Theory of Human Freedom", *Dialogue*, 42, 695-724.
- Leisinger, M.A. 2017, "Locke's Arguments Against the Freedom to Will", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25, 642-62.
- Locke, J. 1975, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Nidditch, P.H. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- LoLordo, A. 2012, *Locke's Moral Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, E.J. 2005, *Locke*, London: Routledge.
- Rickless, S.C. 2000, "Locke on the Freedom to Will", *Locke Newsletter* (now *Locke Studies*), 31, 43-67.
- Rickless, S.C. 2014, *Locke*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rickless, S.C. 2020, "Locke on Freedom", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Zalta, E.N. (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/locke-freedom/>
- Stuart, M. 2013, *Locke's Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walsh, J. 2014, "Locke and the Power to Suspend Desire", *Locke Studies*, 14, 121-57.
- Walsh, J. 2018, "Locke's Last Word on Freedom: Correspondence with Limborch", *Res Philosophica*, 95, 637-61.
- Yaffe, G. 2000, *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Yaffe, G. 2001, "Locke on Refraining, Suspending, and the Freedom to Will", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 18, 373-91.