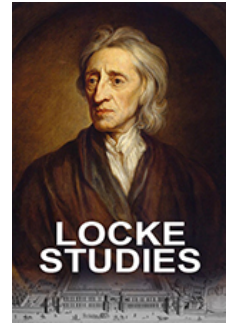


## Locke Studies

# Liberty and Suspension in Locke's Essay

Matthew A Leisinger



Volume 21, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091072ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2021.13972>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Western Libraries at The University of Western Ontario

ISSN

1476-0290 (imprimé)

2561-925X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Leisinger, M. (2021). Liberty and Suspension in Locke's Essay. *Locke Studies*, 21, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2021.13972>

Résumé de l'article

I argue for two controversial claims about Locke's account of liberty in Essay 2.21. The first claim is that Locke does not identify liberty with freedom of action. Instead, Locke places further conditions on liberty beyond to the power to perform or forbear an action at will. The second (and closely related) claim is that Locke takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for liberty—in other words, that possession of the power to suspend and examine desire is one such further condition upon liberty.

© Matthew A Leisinger, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

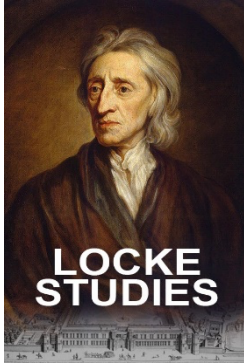
<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>



# LOCKE STUDIES

Vol. 21

[https:// 10.5206/lis.2021.13972](https://10.5206/lis.2021.13972) | ISSN: 2561-925X

---

Submitted: 6 MAY 2021

Revised: 17 MAY 2022

Published online: 20 JULY 2022

For more information, [see this article's homepage](#).

© 2022. Matthew A. Leisinger

## Liberty and Suspension in Locke's *Essay*

MATTHEW A. LEISINGER (YORK UNIVERSITY)

*Abstract:* I argue for two controversial claims about Locke's account of liberty in *Essay* II.xxi. The first is that Locke does not identify liberty with freedom of action but instead places further conditions on liberty beyond the power to perform or forbear an action at will. The second is that Locke takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for liberty—in other words, that possession of the power to suspend and examine desire is one such further condition upon liberty.

*Keywords:* action, agency, desire, judgment, liberty, Locke, suspension, power

[Locke Studies](#) is published by [Western Libraries at The University of Western Ontario](#).

This is an open access article published under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#) license, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and shared under the original license.

On what I will call *the standard interpretation* of Locke's account of liberty in Book II Chapter xxi of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke is taken to endorse the following two claims:

(I) Liberty is freedom of action;

(II) The power to suspend and examine desire is not necessary for liberty.

I am going to argue that the standard interpretation is wrong on both counts. In fact, Locke *rejects* both (I) and (II).

### 1. Background

What is the evidence that Locke endorses (I) and (II)?

Let's start with (I). In II.xxi.8, Locke writes that "the *Idea of Liberty*, is the *Idea* of a Power in any Agent to do or forbear any particular Action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is prefer'd to the other."<sup>1</sup> Since Locke has already defined the will as the "Power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind" (II.xxi.5), Locke appears in this passage to offer an account of liberty as the dependence of action upon volition, or freedom of action. Locke repeats this account elsewhere. For example:

*Liberty . . . is 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. (II.xxi.15)*

*Freedom consists in the dependence of the Existence, or not Existence of any Action, upon our Volition of it. (II.xxi.27)*

Liberty 'tis plain consists in a Power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing as we *will*. (II.xxi.56)

*Liberty* is a power to act or not to act according as the Mind directs. A power to direct the operative faculties to motion or rest in particular instances, is that which we call the *Will*. (II.xxi.71)

There is some disagreement among proponents of the standard interpretation about how best to formalize the account of liberty found in these passages, but the following analysis will be sufficiently representative for our purposes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text citations refer to the Nidditch edition of Locke's *Essay* by book, chapter, and section: John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

An agent S is free (at liberty)<sup>2</sup> with respect to some action  $\phi$  if and only if (i) S is able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  and (ii) S is able not to  $\phi$  if they will not to  $\phi$ .<sup>3</sup>

Locke's examples seem to confirm this reading. A man locked in a room is not free to leave because he fails to satisfy the first condition: he is not able to leave if he wills to leave (II.xxi.10). Likewise, a man striking his friend due to a convulsive motion in his arm does not act freely because he fails to satisfy the second condition: he is not able *not* to strike his friend if he wills not to strike his friend (II.xxi.9).<sup>4</sup> Locke thus appears to identify liberty with freedom of action, defined narrowly as *the power to act (or not to act) as we will*. Or so the standard interpretation would have it.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I assume in what follows that Locke uses "freedom" and "liberty" synonymously.

<sup>3</sup> I take this analysis to agree broadly with that of Samuel C. Rickless ("Locke on Freedom," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 1997–), article published November 16 2015; last modified January 21, 2020; accessed February 17, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-freedom/>), but nothing hangs on this choice. For alternative analyses, see e.g. Antonia LoLordo, *Locke's Moral Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 26–27; E. J. Lowe, *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), 129; Matthew Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 407; and Gideon Yaffe, *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15. It is worth emphasizing that the conditionals in this analysis ought to be understood *causally*. Locke writes: "*Freedom consists in the dependence of the Existence, or not Existence of any Action, upon our Volition of it*" (II.xxi.27). Accordingly, Lockean liberty requires not merely that the agent be able to  $\phi$  or not to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  or not to  $\phi$ , but moreover that whether or not the agent  $\phi$ s *depend causally upon* whether or not the agent wills to  $\phi$ . For a weaker reading of the conditionals, cf. Samuel C. Rickless, "Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency," *Locke Studies* 13 (2013): 43–44. For a response to Rickless, see Antonia LoLordo, "Reply to Rickless," *Locke Studies* 13 (2013): 57–58.

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout the paper, I am assuming that an agent *acts freely* in performing or forbearing some action A if and only if (1) the agent performs or forbears A and (2) the agent *is free* (or *possesses liberty*) with respect to A. An anonymous reviewer observes that Rickless, "Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency," 41–43 rejects this equivalency on the grounds that Locke only presents conditions for *being free* and not conditions for *acting freely*. While Rickless's observation is correct, I nonetheless agree with Vere Chappell ("Power in Locke's *Essay*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding*," ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142) that there is no reason not to derive an account of *acting freely* from Locke's account of *being free*. See also LoLordo's reply to Rickless in "Reply to Rickless," 57–58.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Chappell, "Power in Locke's *Essay*," 142; Vere Chappell, "Locke on the Suspension of Desire," in *John Locke: An Essay concerning Human Understanding in Focus*, ed. Gary Fuller, Robert Stecker, and John P. Wright (London: Routledge, 2000), 236; Don Garrett, "Liberty and Suspension in Locke's Theory of the Will," in *A Companion to Locke*, ed. Matthew Stuart (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 277; LoLordo, *Locke's Moral Man*, 26–27; Samuel C. Rickless, *Locke* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 104; Rickless, "Locke on Freedom"; Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics*, 474; and Yaffe, *Liberty Worth the Name*, 13–14. Opponents of the standard interpretation include those who read Locke as a libertarian. See esp. Peter A. Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 148–54. See also Richard I. Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 268–69; John Colman, *John Locke's Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 218–24; E. J. Lowe, *Locke* (London: Routledge, 2005), 135; J. D. Mabbott, *John Locke* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973),

So much for (I). What about (II)? After introducing his account of liberty in II.xxi.8, Locke goes on in the chapter to explain that “that which successively determines the *Will*” is “*Desire*; which is an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good” (II.xxi.31). Since the mind is perpetually “beset with sundry *uneasinesses*, distracted with different *desires*” (II.xxi.40), Locke worries that “a very little part of our life is so vacant from these *uneasinesses*, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good” (II.xxi.45). Fortunately, Locke explains, the mind has “a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires” and “to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others” (II.xxi.47). During this period of suspension and examination, Locke argues that “it is in our power, to raise our desires, in a due proportion to the value of” their objects (II.xxi.46). We are thus able to suspend our desires, examine their objects, and—if all goes well—to increase the relative strength of our desires for greater, absent goods.

Locke often seems to imply that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty. Immediately after introducing the power to suspend and examine desire, Locke says that this power “seems to me the source of all liberty” and, moreover, that “the liberty Man has [lies in]” this power (II.xxi.47). A few sections later, he writes that the power to “*suspend* this prosecution [of true felicity] in particular cases, till they have looked before them, and informed themselves” is “the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings” and likewise that “the great inlet, and exercise of all the *liberty* Men have . . . [lies] in this, that they can *suspend* their desires, and stop them from determining their *wills* to any action, till they have duly and fairly *examin’d* the good and evil of it” (II.xxi.52). The implication seems to be that we would not be free if we were unable to suspend and examine our desires.<sup>6</sup>

Proponents of the standard interpretation resist this implication. The trouble is that, as we have just seen, Locke seems to identify liberty with freedom of action, and the power to suspend and examine desire clearly is *not* necessary for freedom of action. After all, freedom of action consists solely in the dependence of action upon volition. As a result, it

---

66–69. For criticism of the libertarian reading, see Chappell, “Locke on the Suspension of Desire,” 245–46; Jack D. Davidson, “Locke’s Finely Spun Liberty,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2003): 213–24; Michael Losonsky, “Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment by Peter Schouls,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (1995): 293–314; and Stuart, *Locke’s Metaphysics*, 467–73.

<sup>6</sup> I read these passages as suggesting that the power to suspend and examine desire is at least *necessary* for liberty. Julie Walsh and Thomas M. Lennon read II.xxi.47 as claiming that Locke takes liberty to “consist in” the power to suspend and examine desire. “Absential Suspension: Malebranche and Locke on Human Freedom,” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2019): 10, <https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.31>. I agree if they mean merely that liberty *partially* consists in the power to suspend and examine desire, in the sense that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for and therefore partially constitutive of liberty. I disagree, however, if they mean that liberty *fully* consists in the power to suspend and examine desire, in the sense that there is nothing more to liberty above and beyond the power to suspend and examine desire. After all, Locke writes in II.xxi.47 that the power to suspend and examine desire is “the source of all liberty.” If *x* is the source of *y*, then this would seem to imply at least that *x* is necessary for *y*, and *perhaps* that *x* is sufficient for *y*, but certainly not that *x* is identical to *y* or that *y* fully consists in *x* or that there is nothing more to *y* above and beyond *x*.

simply does not matter, so far as freedom of action is concerned, *how* exactly an agent comes to will as they do—whether, for example, they were able to suspend and examine desire before willing. A kleptomaniac stealing a necklace may thus act freely on this account so long as they are able either to steal the necklace or not to steal the necklace, as they will. It is simply irrelevant if the kleptomaniac’s volition to steal is brought about by an irresistible or un-suspend-able psychological compulsion. The standard interpretation thus infers Locke’s acceptance of (II) from his commitment to (I): given that Locke identifies liberty with freedom of action, he must deny that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty.<sup>7</sup>

Proponents of the standard interpretation give varying explanations of what Locke might mean when he says that the power to suspend and examine desire is “the source of all liberty,” “the hinge” on which liberty “turns,” and so on. Some argue that Locke distinguishes two kinds of liberty, one that does not require the power to suspend and examine desire (freedom of action) and another that does. John Yolton, for example, notes that compared with the initial definition of liberty in II.xxi.8, Locke’s discussion of suspension in II.xxi.47 “gives what may appear to be a different definition of freedom or liberty” and suggests that “We might better call this ‘moral liberty.’”<sup>8</sup> Others argue that, while Locke does not distinguish a further kind of liberty in addition to freedom of action, Locke does hold that the power to suspend and examine desire is required not for a further

---

<sup>7</sup> Opponents of the standard interpretation who deny that Locke accepts (I), such as those who read Locke as a libertarian (see note 5), thus tend also to deny that Locke accepts (II). One dissenting voice on this point is Stuart who, in *Locke’s Metaphysics*, 474–75, agrees with the standard interpretation that Locke accepts (I) but nonetheless argues that Locke denies (II). See also Chappell, who endorses Stuart’s interpretation. “Power in Locke’s Essay,” 155–56. While Stuart’s interpretation is in some ways similar to my own, I will criticize Stuart’s interpretation in §4.1 and explain how my interpretation differs from it at the end of §5. Relatedly, Walsh and Lennon also reject the standard interpretation and instead read Locke as claiming in II.xxi.47 that liberty “consists in” the power to suspend and examine desire (see note 6). “Absential Suspension: Malebranche and Locke on Human Freedom,” 10. Walsh and Lennon do not, however, explicitly take up the question of how to reconcile this reading of II.xxi.47 with Locke’s account of liberty as, in their words, “a power to act according to preference,” “Absential Suspension: Malebranche and Locke on Human Freedom,” 13. While I do not take myself to be committed to any of the details of Walsh and Lennon’s proposal about how to understand Lockean suspension, which is the main focus of their discussion, one way to understand my project in §§4–5 might be as filling this lacuna in their discussion by attempting to explain why Locke thinks that an agent must possess the power to suspend and examine desire in order to be able to act according to their preference.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the ‘Essay’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 147. For similar interpretations, see Douglas John Casson, *Liberating Judgment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 177; Colman, *John Locke’s Moral Philosophy*, 218; Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal ‘Ought’: 1640–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 160–61; Davidson, “Locke’s Finely Spun Liberty,” 226–27; Don Garrett, “Liberty and Suspension,” 274–77; James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 295; and Shelley Weinberg, *Consciousness in Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 196. See also Richard Glauser, who argues that suspension is necessary only for liberty of thought and not for liberty more generally. “Thinking and Willing in Locke’s Theory of Human Freedom,” *Dialogue* 42, no. 4 (2003): 706–7.

kind of liberty but for *something else*. Antonia LoLordo, for example, argues that “the capacity to suspend and deliberate is necessary”—not for liberty but—“for moral agency because it allows our actions to be governed by and responsive to reasons.”<sup>9</sup> LoLordo is transparent about the motivation for this interpretation: while “Locke never explicitly says that the role of suspension is to ground moral agency,” LoLordo notes that “the suspension doctrine must be intended to provide an account of something other than freedom of action”; LoLordo then argues that, by making suspension necessary for moral agency, this account “explains how suspension is relevant to liberty without making it necessary for a particular action to be free.”<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, Samuel C. Rickless argues that the power to suspend and examine desire is required not for liberty itself but for its proper functioning, because liberty would be of little use if we were unable to suspend and examine our desires before willing.<sup>11</sup> Again, Rickless’s proposal is motivated by his puzzlement at Locke’s claim that the power to suspend and examine desire is “the source of all liberty”: “Why does [Locke] say this if he treats liberty generally as the power to do what one wills? After all, does one not retain *this* power, and so retain one’s freedom of action, even if one loses the power to suspend willing?”<sup>12</sup> Rickless answers: “Locke’s thought here is that freedom of action would not mean much if one lacked the power of suspension” because “It is to the power of suspension . . . that one owes one’s ability to achieve happiness in the long run.”<sup>13</sup> According to Rickless, therefore, the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary not for liberty per se, which Locke identifies with freedom of action, but rather for the ability to put one’s liberty to use in the pursuit of happiness.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 46. Similarly, Yaffe argues that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary not for liberty but for “full-fledged free agency.” *Liberty Worth the Name*, 12–74. Note, however, that Yaffe’s “full-fledged free agency” is different from LoLordo’s “moral agency”: while both presuppose freedom of action, Yaffe’s “full-fledged free agency” additionally requires the power to bring it about that our volitions are determined by the good (*Liberty Worth the Name*, 54), whereas LoLordo’s “moral agency” additionally requires the ability to govern our actions by responding to reasons (*Locke’s Moral Man*, 46). For criticism of Yaffe’s proposal, see LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 50–53 and Garrett, “Liberty and Suspension,” 272–74.

<sup>10</sup> LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Rickless, *Locke*, 110. See also Rickless, “Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency,” 49–50; Samuel C. Rickless, “Review of *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency*, by Gideon Yaffe,” *Locke Studies* 1 (2001): 252–54; and Rickless, “Locke on Freedom.” Chappell in “Locke on the Suspension of Desire,” makes a similar proposal (246–47), although Chappell seems later to have changed his mind. See “Power in Locke’s Essay,” 155–56. See also Davidson, “Locke’s Finely Spun Liberty,” 226 and Garrett, “Liberty and Suspension,” 267–68, 277, who both emphasize that suspension is important for the proper functioning of liberty despite also arguing that Locke distinguishes two kinds of liberty.

<sup>12</sup> Rickless, *Locke*, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Rickless, *Locke*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> An anonymous reviewer observes that Rickless does maintain that the power of suspension is necessary for liberty with respect to the act of willing to act on some desire. This is because Rickless

Stepping back, while they disagree about the details, proponents of the standard interpretation agree about the big picture: because Locke identifies liberty with freedom of action, it follows that the power to suspend and examine desire cannot strictly be necessary for liberty. Instead, it must be necessary either for a second kind of liberty or for a heightened form of agency or for the proper functioning of liberty. In other words, since Locke endorses (I), he must endorse (II) as well. In the rest of this paper, I am going to argue that the standard interpretation is mistaken on both scores and, instead, that Locke *rejects* both (I) and (II).

## **2. Against (I): Liberty is *not* Freedom of Action**

Here is my argument for the conclusion that Locke rejects (I):

- (i) Locke holds that, in order for an agent to be free with respect to some action  $\phi$ , the agent's volition to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ) must be determined by the agent's judgment.<sup>15</sup>
- (ii) Freedom of action makes no such requirement.
- (iii) Therefore, Locke does not identify liberty with freedom of action.

I take (ii) to be uncontroversial. Recall that, in order for an agent to possess freedom of action with respect to some action  $\phi$ , the agent need only satisfy two conditions: the agent must be able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  and the agent must be able *not* to  $\phi$  if they will *not* to  $\phi$ . Neither of these conditions says anything about judgment. The agent may possess freedom of action, therefore, even if their volition is not determined in any sense by their judgment. I also take it to be uncontroversial that (iii) follows from (i) and (ii). If determination by judgment is a necessary condition for Lockean liberty but not for

---

understands suspension as the act of forbearing from willing to act on some desire. See Rickless, "Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency," 49. It follows that an agent must possess the power of suspension in order to possess liberty with respect to the act of willing to act on some desire. See Rickless, "Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency," 50; *Locke*, 110. Nonetheless, Rickless denies that the power of suspension is necessary for liberty more generally. For Rickless, an agent who desires to perform some action A and lacks the power of suspension could possess liberty with respect to A even though they could not possess liberty with respect to the act of willing to perform A. In this sense, Rickless agrees with the standard interpretation that Lockean liberty does not require the power to suspend and examine desire.

<sup>15</sup> As I will understand (i), an agent's volition to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ) may be *determined* by their judgment even if the agent has not yet willed one way or the other. (i) requires only that the agent's volition depend causally upon their judgment, just as Locke's account of liberty requires that the agent's action depend causally upon their volition (see note 3). So, if an agent is deliberating about whether to  $\phi$ , the agent may be free with respect to  $\phi$ -ing, even if their judgment has not yet determined their volition to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ), so long as whether the agent wills to  $\phi$  or not to  $\phi$  depends causally upon—and is in this sense *determined by*—their judgment.



freedom of action, then it follows (by Leibniz's Law) that Lockean liberty is not identical to freedom of action. My task, therefore, is to establish (i).

There is, I believe, strong textual support for (i). In particular, it seems to me that the following passage is just about decisive:

Nay were we determined by any thing but the last result of our own Minds, judging of the good or evil of any action, we were not free, the very end of our Freedom being, that we might attain the good we chuse. And therefore every Man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do: else he would be under the determination of some other than himself, which is want of Liberty. (II.xxi.48)

In this passage, Locke states unequivocally that an agent would not be free if they were not “determined in *willing* by [their] own Thought and Judgment.” While we will have to get clearer about the nature of this judgment and about the sense in which Locke thinks that such a judgment may determine the will, this passage provides compelling evidence for (i): in Locke's view, an agent is free with respect to some action *only if* the agent's volition to perform (or forbear) that action is determined by their judgment.

Further evidence may be found in a passage that Locke added to the fifth edition of the *Essay* as a result of his correspondence with Philip van Limborch. In a letter to Limborch of 12 August 1701, Locke responds to Limborch's suggestion (as Locke understands it) that liberty might consist in “a power of willing anything unadvisedly, either without previous cogitation or contrary to the judgment of the understanding” (*Correspondence* 7, 410/Letter #2979).<sup>16</sup> Locke rejects each of these possibilities. First, liberty cannot be a power of willing “without previous cogitation” because “liberty presupposes cogitation” (*Correspondence* 7, 410/Letter #2979). Second, liberty cannot be a power of willing “contrary to the judgment of the understanding” because “man does not possess such a power. For an action of willing this or that always follows a judgment of the understanding by which a man judges this to be better for here and now” (*Correspondence* 7, 410/Letter #2979). Locke thus maintains that liberty requires at least *some* prior cogitation: if an agent wills to  $\phi$ , the agent is free with respect to  $\phi$ -ing *only if* the agent had *some* prior thought or cogitation—presumably, some prior thought or cogitation *about*  $\phi$ -ing. And Locke also maintains that judgment determines the will: if an agent wills to  $\phi$ , the agent's volition to  $\phi$  is determined by the agent's judgment that  $\phi$ -ing is best. Now, in this passage, Locke stops short of putting these two claims together and explicitly endorsing (i): he claims that liberty *requires* some prior cogitation and he also claims that judgment (a certain kind of prior cogitation) does *in fact* determine the

---

<sup>16</sup> John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke*. 8 vols, ed. E. S. De Beer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–1989). Cited in-text as “*Correspondence*” by volume and page and then by letter. For detailed discussion of Locke's correspondence with Limborch, see Julie Walsh, “Locke's Last Word on Freedom: Correspondence with Limborch,” *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 4 (2018): 637–61. See also Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics*, 444–92 *passim*.

will, but he fails clearly to articulate the further claim that liberty *requires* that judgment determine the will.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, however, Locke does make this further claim in a passage that he added to the fifth edition of the *Essay* as a result of his correspondence with Limborch:

I wish they, who lay so much stress on such an *antecedent indifferency*, as they call it, had told us plainly, whether this supposed *indifferency* be antecedent to the Thought and Judgment of the Understanding, as well as to the decree of the *Will*. For it is pretty hard to state it between them; *i.e.* immediately after the Judgment of the Understanding, and before the determination of the *Will*, because the determination of the *Will* immediately follows the Judgment of the Understanding; and to place Liberty in an *indifferency*, antecedent to the Thought and Judgment of the Understanding, seems to me to place Liberty in a state of darkness, wherein we can neither see nor say any thing of it; at least it places it in a subject incapable of it, no Agent being allowed capable of Liberty, but in Consequence of Thought and Judgment. (II.xxi.71)

In this passage, Locke claims not merely that liberty presupposes some prior cogitation and that judgment does in fact determine the will but moreover that liberty *requires* that judgment determine the will. Locke makes this crucial further claim in the final sentence of the passage, where he writes that “no Agent [is] allowed capable of Liberty, but in Consequence of Thought and Judgment” (II.xxi.71). In other words, in order for an agent to be free with respect to some action  $\phi$ , the agent’s volition to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ) must be determined by the agent’s judgment.

It might be objected that I am overreading Locke’s claim in this passage. When Locke writes that “no Agent [is] allowed capable of Liberty, but in Consequence of Thought and Judgment,” perhaps he means merely that liberty is a power to act or not to act *at a time consequent to* thought and judgment.<sup>18</sup> While this may be a permissible reading of the passage, I think that we ought to reject it. The precise phrase that Locke uses is not “consequent to” but “in Consequence of.” To say that  $x$  occurs *consequent to*  $y$  plausibly means that  $x$  occurs *at a time consequent to*  $y$ . By contrast, to say that  $x$  occurs *in consequence of*  $y$  seems more plausibly to mean, not that  $x$  occurs at a time consequent to  $y$ , but rather that  $x$  occurs *as a consequence of*  $y$ —that is, that  $x$  occurs *as a result of*  $y$ . Accordingly, when Locke writes that “no Agent [is] allowed capable of Liberty, but in Consequence of Thought and Judgment,” I take Locke’s claim to be that liberty requires that one’s action occur *as a result of* one’s judgment. In other words, liberty requires that judgment determine the will.

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Stuart who reads Locke as making the stronger claim in his letter to Limborch, *Locke’s Metaphysics*, 475–76. While I am sympathetic to this reading, I am not convinced that the texts ultimately bear it out.

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this alternative interpretation.

There is at least one more passage that may lend *some* additional support to (i), although I will concede up front that this passage is much less clear than either II.xxi.48 or II.xxi.71:

Would any one be a Changeling, because he is less determined, by wise Considerations, than a wise Man? Is it worth the Name of *Freedom* to be at liberty to play the Fool, and draw Shame and Misery upon a Man's self? If to break loose from the conduct of Reason, and to want that restraint of Examination and Judgment, which keeps us from chusing or doing the worse, be *Liberty*, true Liberty, mad Men and Fools are the only Freeman: But yet, I think, no Body would chuse to be mad for the sake of such *Liberty*, but he that is mad already. (II.xxi.50)

Locke's main goal in this passage to argue negatively against (iv):

- (iv) An agent possesses liberty only if their will *is not* determined by their judgment.

Locke clearly finds (iv) implausible: if (iv) were true, then “mad Men and Fools [would be] the only Freeman.” I believe, however, that Locke also means to be arguing positively for (v):

- (v) An agent possesses liberty only if their will *is* determined by their judgment.

Locke implies (v) when he asks rhetorically whether “It is worth the Name of Freedom to be at liberty to play the Fool.” His point, I believe, is that mad men and fools lack liberty because their wills are not determined by their judgment.

Rickless proposes a different reading of the mad-men-and-fools passage: “The point here, I take it, is that though the ‘liberty to play the Fool’, i.e. the liberty to act in ways likely to produce unhappiness, is a kind of freedom, it is not a kind of freedom ‘worth the name.’”<sup>19</sup> I do not find Rickless's reading convincing, however. Consider the following line from the mad-men-and-fools passage:

If to break loose from the conduct of Reason, and to want that restraint of Examination and Judgment, which keeps us from chusing or doing the worse, be *Liberty*, true Liberty, mad Men and Fools are the only Freeman.

Locke's implicit reasoning here may be reconstructed as a simple modus tollens:

---

<sup>19</sup> Rickless, “Review of Liberty Worth the Name,” 252. See also Rickless, “Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency,” 50.

1. “If to break loose from the conduct of Reason, and to want that restraint of Examination and Judgment . . . be *Liberty*, true Liberty, [then] mad Men and Fools are the only Freemen.”
2. But, *obviously*, it is not the case that “mad men and Fools are the only Freemen.”
3. Therefore, it is not the case that “to break loose from the conduct of Reason, and to want that restraint of Examination and Judgment . . . [is] *Liberty*.”

Locke’s conclusion, therefore, is not merely that the liberty of a mad man is not “worth the name” of liberty but that *it is no liberty at all*, because liberty requires the “restraint of Examination and Judgment.” I take Locke to be making the same point in the following passage:

Without Understanding, Liberty (if it could be) would signify nothing . . . He that is at liberty to ramble in perfect darkness, what is his liberty better than if he were driven up and down, as a bubble by the force of the wind? (II.xxi.67)

Prima facie, this passage might suggest that one could possess a kind of liberty (the liberty of a bubble) even if the will were not determined by the understanding’s judgment. Locke’s parenthetical “if it could be” weighs against this reading, however. Locke’s point in adding this qualification is to indicate that he is about to engage in a kind of *per impossibile* reasoning. If it *were* possible to have liberty without understanding, such liberty would be worthless—it would “signify nothing.” The implication, however, is that such liberty without understanding is, in fact, *not possible* in the first place. If we try to imagine a deviant kind of liberty lacking the guidance of judgment, Locke suggests, it quickly becomes clear that this imagined “liberty,” like the “liberty” of mad men and fools, is no liberty at all.

Further support for my reading of the mad-men-and-fools passage may be found in Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that “Freedom is not, as we are told, *A Liberty for every Man to do what he lists . . .* But a *Liberty* to dispose, and order, as he lists . . . within the Allowance of those Laws under which he is” (*Two Treatises* II.57, 306).<sup>20</sup> Locke is particularly concerned with the “Law of Nature,” which he takes to govern even the state of nature (*Two Treatises* II.6, 271). He argues that, since “no Body can be under a Law, which is not promulgated to him,” and since the law of reason is “promulgated or made known by *Reason* only,” it follows that “he that is not come to the Use of his *Reason*, cannot be said to be *under this Law*” and therefore that those lacking reason do not possess liberty (*Two Treatises* II.57, 305). Locke concludes that children who have not yet attained the age of reason lack liberty

---

<sup>20</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Cited in-text as “*Two Treatises*” by treatise, section, and page.

(*Two Treatises* II.58–59, 306–7). He draws a parallel conclusion about mad men and fools:

But if through defects that may happen out of the ordinary course of Nature, any one comes not to such a degree of Reason, wherein he might be supposed capable of knowing the Law, and so living within the Rules of it, he is *never capable of being a Free Man*, he is never let loose to the dispose of his own Will (because he knows no bounds to it, has not Understanding, its proper Guide) . . . And so *Lunaticks* and *Ideots* are never set free from the Government of their Parents. (*Two Treatises* II.60, 307–8)

In this passage, Locke clearly asserts that mad men and fools (“*Lunaticks* and *Ideots*”) lack liberty because they lack reason or understanding by which to guide their volitions. Locke’s claim is not merely that such individuals do not possess a liberty “worth the name” but rather that they do not possess any liberty at all.

In summary, I think that there is strong textual support for (i): Locke holds that, in order for an agent to be free with respect to some action  $\phi$ , the agent’s volition to  $\phi$  must be determined by the agent’s judgment. Given that freedom of action does not make any such requirement, it follows that Locke does not identify liberty with freedom of action. For Locke, liberty involves something more than barely *the power to act (or not to act) as we will*. And this is just to say that Locke rejects (I).

### 3. Objections

Before turning to (II), let me pause to consider two objections.

#### 3.1. First Objection

First, it might be objected that my interpretation runs afoul of Locke’s own theory of motivation. Locke famously argues that what determines the will is not “the greater good in view: But some (and for the most part the most pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under,” explaining that “This *Uneasiness* we may call, as it is, *Desire*; which is an *uneasiness* of the mind for want of some absent good” (II.xxi.31). Locke thus holds that the will is determined not by an agent’s judgment of the greater good but by desire. And so (the objection might go) Locke cannot hold that liberty *requires* that judgment determines the will, since Locke *denies* that judgment determines the will—unless, of course, he wishes to deny that we ever act freely!

My response to this objection is that, while Locke does deny that the will is determined by an agent’s judgment *of the greater good*, Locke does not deny that the will is determined by an agent’s judgment *in any sense*. On the contrary, there are many passages in which Locke clearly affirms that there is at least one kind of judgment that does determine the will:

Nay were we determined by any thing but the last result of our own Minds, judging of the good or evil of any action, we were not free. (II.xxi.48)

Every man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do. (II.xxi.48)

To deny, that a Man's *will*, in every determination, follows his own Judgment, is . . . a Contradiction too manifest to be admitted. (II.xxi.48)<sup>21</sup>

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. (II.xxi.56)

The determination of the *Will* immediately follows the Judgment of the Understanding. (II.xxi.71; see also *Correspondence* 7, 410–11/Letter #2979)

It is clear from these passages that Locke does take judgment to determine the will, at least in some sense. The difficult question is: *in what sense?*

A complete answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this paper. My response to the present objection only requires that Locke takes judgment to determine the will *in some sense*. Recent scholarship, however, has suggested at least two senses in which Locke takes judgment to determine the will.<sup>22</sup>

First, Locke writes that “all good, even seen, and confessed to be so, does not necessarily move every particular Man's *desire*; but only that part, or so much of it, as is consider'd, and taken to make a necessary part of his happiness” (II.xxi.43). Later, Locke makes it clear that this “taking” is a kind of judgment: “And therefore being *uneasie* in the want of whatever is judged necessary to their Happiness, as soon as any good appears to make a part of their portion of happiness, they begin to *desire* it” (II.xxi.43). Locke thus holds that, if an agent desires some good, then the reason why the agent desires that good is because the agent judges that it is necessary for their happiness.<sup>23</sup> So, suppose that an agent desires some absent good G and that this desire determines the agent to will to perform some action  $\phi$  for the sake of G. Locke holds that the agent's desire for G originates in the judgment that G is necessary for their happiness. In this sense, Locke holds that the agent's volition to  $\phi$  was determined *indirectly* by their judgment that G is

---

<sup>21</sup> The ellipsis in this quotation is a bit misleading, but I will discuss this passage further in §3.2.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics*, 480 for an alternative account of how judgment might determine the will.

<sup>23</sup> So far as I can tell, this interpretation originates with Richard Glauser (“Locke and the Problem of Weakness of Will,” in *Mind, Values, and Metaphysics: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Kevin Mulligan*, ed. Anne Reboul [Dordrecht: Springer, 2014], 483–99) and was subsequently developed by Leonardo Moauro and Samuel C. Rickless (“Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1, no. 1: [2019]: 1–13, <http://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.39>) and Matthew A. Leisinger (“Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia,” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 2, no.1 (2020): 1–13, <http://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.105>). See also Tito Magri, “Locke, Suspension of Desire, and the Remote Good,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000): 67.

necessary for their happiness. Therefore, one kind of judgment that determines the will, according to Locke, is an agent's judgment about what is necessary for their happiness.

Second, there are a number of passages in which Locke seems to claim that the will is determined not only by an agent's judgment about the *ends* of their actions but also by an agent's judgment about those *actions* themselves. In a passage quoted above, for example, Locke says that "Man is . . . determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do" (II.xxi.48). Richard Glauser argues plausibly that Locke is concerned in such passages with a kind of instrumental judgment:<sup>24</sup> given that the agent desires *G*, the agent judges that  $\phi$ -ing is best *as a means for obtaining G*.<sup>25</sup> Locke's view thus seems to be that, whenever an agent wills to act for some end, the agent's judgment must endorse both *the action* (as best) as well as *the end* (as necessary for their happiness).<sup>26</sup>

Which of these two kinds of judgment—about *actions* or about *ends*—does Locke take to be relevant to liberty? Unfortunately, Locke isn't entirely clear on this point. There is at least one passage, however, in which he seems to take both to play some role:

Nay were we determined by any thing but the last result of our own Minds, judging of the good or evil of any action, we were not free, the very end of our Freedom being, that we might attain the good we chuse. And therefore every Man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do: else he would be under the determination of some other than himself, which is want of Liberty. (II.xxi.48)

What is interesting about this passage is that the first sentence seems concerned with judgments about *ends* while the second sentence seems concerned with judgments about *actions*. In the first sentence, Locke claims that judgment is relevant to liberty because judgment constitutes the agent's endorsement of the good end for the sake of which they perform their action ("the good we chuse"). In the second sentence, by contrast, Locke claims that judgment is relevant to liberty because an agent's judgment about which action is best to perform is what constitutes the agent's self-determination of their actions.

I think that this ambivalence is telling. Locke's central commitment is to the claim that determination by judgment is necessary for liberty. As it turns out, Locke thinks that judgment determines the will in two respects: it determines both the *object* of volition (some action judged to be best) as well as the *end* of volition (some good judged to be

---

<sup>24</sup> "Thinking and Willing," 700–2.

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion, see Glauser, "Locke and the Problem of Weakness of Will," 499; Moauro and Rickless, "Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?," 4–5; Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics*, 476–81; and Walsh, "Locke's Last Word."

<sup>26</sup> This interpretation raises important questions about Locke's account of akrasia. For extensive discussion, see Glauser, "Locke and the Problem of Weakness of Will"; Moauro and Rickless, "Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?"; and Leisinger, "Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia."

necessary for happiness). Since Locke never specifies that only one of these kinds of judgment is relevant to liberty, and since he seems to treat both as relevant in 2.21.48, the natural conclusion to draw is that he does indeed take both to play some role. So, while Locke is not explicit on this point, I think that we ought tentatively to read Locke as holding that, in order for an agent to be free with respect to  $\phi$ -ing for the sake of G, the agent's volition to  $\phi$  for the sake of G must be determined both by (1) the agent's judgment that G is necessary for their happiness and also by (2) the agent's judgment that  $\phi$ -ing is best as a means for obtaining G.

### 3.2. Second Objection

Second, it might be objected that my interpretation runs afoul of Locke's explicit definition of liberty in II.xxi.8: "the *Idea of Liberty*, is the *Idea* of a Power in any Agent to do or forbear any particular Action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is preferr'd to the other." This definition does not explicitly mention judgment, nor do any of the other similar definitions that Locke offers throughout the chapter. And so (the objection might go) it seems unlikely that Locke takes determination by judgment to be necessary for liberty.

While I concede that Locke does not mention judgment *explicitly* when he defines liberty in II.xxi.8, I want to suggest that Locke takes judgment to be *implicit* in these definitions. Why might Locke think that judgment is implicit in his II.xxi.8 definition of liberty? The following passage suggests an answer:

And to deny, that a Man's *will*, in every determination, follows his own Judgment, is to say, that a Man *wills* and acts for an end that he would not have at the time that he *wills* and acts for it. For if he prefers it in his present Thoughts before any other, 'tis plain he then thinks better of it, and would have it before any other, unless he can have, and not have it; *will* and not *will* it at the same time; a Contradiction too manifest to be admitted. (II.xxi.48)

While Locke's argument in this passage is highly compressed and somewhat obscure, his main claim is clear. Locke maintains that it would entail "a Contradiction" to "deny, that a Man's *will*, in every determination, follows his own Judgment." So, suppose that an agent were to will to perform some action even though their volition was not determined by their judgment. According to Locke, it follows that the agent would thereby "*will* and not *will* it at the same time"—a plain contradiction. Locke thus takes there to be an extremely tight connection between judgment and the will.

I do not wish to overstate Locke's claim. When Locke writes, for example, that "mad Men and Fools" lack the "restraint of Examination and Judgment, which keeps us from chusing or doing the worse," he seems to concede that mad men and fools are at least able to will or "chuse" their actions (II.xxi.50). Likewise, Locke explains in the *Second Treatise* that the reason why "*Lunaticks and Ideots*" are "never let loose to the dispose of [their] own Will" is "because [they know] no bounds to it, [have] not Understanding, its proper Guide" (*Two Treatises* II.60, 308), again implying that such individuals at least do possess a will even if they lack the understanding to guide it. Therefore, Locke does not



seem to be committed to the strong claim that it is conceptually impossible to will an action without the guidance of judgment.<sup>27</sup> Instead, I think that we ought to read Locke's claim as *psychological* rather than *conceptual*.<sup>28</sup> If we set aside exceptional cases and focus on ordinary adult human beings (the *Essay's* presumed readership), Locke takes it to be "plain" that judgment always determines the will—so plain, in fact, that it would be tantamount to a "Contradiction" to deny it.<sup>29</sup>

This result helps to explain why Locke does not mention judgment explicitly in his II.xxi.8 definition of liberty. In II.xxi.8, Locke offers an account of liberty as an agent's power to perform or forbear some action, depending on whether the agent *wills* to perform or forbear that action. We now know, however, that Locke takes there to be a remarkably tight connection between judgment and the will—so tight a connection, in fact, that it would be contradictory in some sense to deny that judgment determines the will. As a result, it seems entirely plausible that Locke would take judgment to figure *implicitly* in his II.xxi.8 account of liberty. While Locke does not draw attention to this feature of his account in II.xxi.8, he makes it abundantly clear later in the chapter.

#### **4. Against (II): The Power to Suspend and Examine Desire is Necessary for Liberty**

I turn now to (II), the claim that the power to suspend and examine desire is not necessary for liberty. I am going to argue that Locke rejects (II). Phrased positively, I am going to argue that, for Locke, the power to suspend and examine desire *is* necessary for liberty.

##### 4.1. Preamble: Suspension and Agency

Before presenting my own interpretation, it may help to begin with a variant of the standard interpretation developed by Matthew Stuart.<sup>30</sup> Stuart agrees with the standard interpretation that Locke accepts (I), which identifies liberty with freedom of action.

---

<sup>27</sup> Yaffe reads Locke as endorsing the strong claim (*Liberty Worth the Name*, 89), but cf. LoLordo for a response to Yaffe (*Locke's Moral Man*, 44–45).

<sup>28</sup> This distinction is important. If we were to read Locke's claim as conceptual, then we could hold that Locke accepts (I) after all. On this reading, Locke would identify liberty with freedom of action, but determination by judgment would be built into freedom of action as follows: an agent S is free with respect to some action  $\phi$  if and only if (i) S is able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  and (ii) S is able not to  $\phi$  if they will not to  $\phi$ ; but, S wills to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ) if and only if S's judgment determines S to will to  $\phi$  (or not to  $\phi$ ); therefore, an agent S is free with respect to some action  $\phi$  if and only if (i\*) S is able to  $\phi$  if S's judgment determines S to will to  $\phi$  and (ii\*) S is able not to  $\phi$  if S's judgment determines S to will not to  $\phi$ . I myself have been tempted by this reading in this past but have been unable to convince myself that Locke posits such a strong, conceptual connection between judgment and the will. If I wanted to defend (I), however, then this is the approach that I would take.

<sup>29</sup> I will return to this line of thought in §5.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart, *Locke's Metaphysics*, 473–76. See also Chappell, "Power in Locke's *Essay*," 155–56, who endorses Stuart's interpretation.

Stuart recognizes, however, that there are many passages in which Locke *seems* to claim that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty—it is “the source of all liberty” (II.xxi.47), the “hinge” on which liberty “turns” (II.xxi.52), and so on. These passages lead Stuart to buck the standard interpretation and deny that Locke accepts (II). On Stuart’s reading, Locke holds that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty. Stuart thus faces the task of reconciling this claim with Locke’s supposed identification of liberty with freedom of action. Stuart’s proposal is that Locke takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary not strictly for *liberty* but rather for *agency*. This is because, without the power to suspend and examine desire, a being’s supposed “actions” would not properly qualify as expressions of agency. And, according to Stuart, Locke assumes that only agents can possess liberty. Therefore, since the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for agency, and since only agents can possess liberty, it follows that the power to suspend and examine desire is also necessary for liberty. In this sense, Stuart claims that the power to suspend and examine desire is “built into” Locke’s definition of liberty in II.xxi.8.<sup>31</sup>

As we will see, I agree with Stuart that the power to suspend and examine desire is “built into” Locke’s definition of liberty in II.xxi.8 and, as a result, that Locke does take the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for liberty. I do not, however, find plausible Stuart’s explanation of *how* the power to suspend and examine desire is built into Locke’s account of liberty. So far as I can tell, there is no reason to attribute to Locke a thick conception of agency as requiring the power to suspend and examine desire. For Locke, an *agent* is just a being that possesses *active power*, that is, the power to bring about some change (II.xxi.1–2). This point is significant because Locke often attributes active powers to beings that clearly lack the power to suspend and examine desire. Locke’s leading examples of active power in II.xxi.1, for example, include the active power of fire to melt gold or the active power of the sun to blanch wax. Admittedly, these examples are controversial, because there is disagreement about whether Locke ultimately thinks that material substances are able (absent divine superaddition) to possess active power.<sup>32</sup> This disagreement, however, is irrelevant for our purposes. Whatever Locke’s considered view on the metaphysics of active power, he does at least seem to think that it is *coherent* to attribute active power to non-thinking substances, which by itself suggests that he does not take the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for agency. Moreover, setting aside these controversial examples, it is uncontroversial that Locke takes non-human animals to possess the active power of “spontaneous motion,” that is, the power

---

<sup>31</sup> Stuart, *Locke’s Metaphysics*, 474.

<sup>32</sup> For a negative answer, see Ruth Mattern, “Locke on Active Power and the Obscure Idea of Active Power from Bodies,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 11, no. 1 (1980): 39–77. See also LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 28–34. For a positive answer, see Rickless, “Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency,” 35–40.

to cause motion in their bodies (see e.g. III.iii.8).<sup>33</sup> Since these non-human animals presumably include beings that lack the power to suspend and examine desire, it follows that Locke does not take the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for agency. Therefore, since Locke does not seem to espouse the thick conception of agency that Stuart's interpretation requires, I think that we ought to reject Stuart's interpretation.

The problem with Stuart's interpretation, as I see it, is that Stuart is still too wedded to the standard interpretation. Stuart sees—rightly, I believe—that Locke rejects (II): Locke does, indeed, hold that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty. The trouble is that Stuart accepts the standard interpretation's claim that Locke accepts (I), which identifies liberty with freedom of action. As a result, Stuart faces the daunting task of finding some way to shoehorn the power to suspend and examine desire into freedom of action. By contrast, I have already argued that Locke rejects (I): Locke *does not* identify liberty with freedom of action. This result, I believe, opens up new interpretive possibilities for thinking about how Locke understands the relation between liberty on the one hand and the power to suspend and examine desire on the other. My goal in the rest of this section will be to try to explain why it is, exactly, that Locke takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for liberty. In §5, I will then return to the question of how to reconcile Locke's claims about the power to suspend and examine desire with his account of liberty in II.xxi.8.

#### 4.2. My Proposal: Suspension and the Threat of Desire

We can begin with an observation about desire. Locke's treatment of desire is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, Locke argues that the "*uneasiness* [of desire] alone operates on the *will*, and determines it in its choice" (II.xxi.36). And yet, on the other hand, Locke sometimes treats desire as a *threat* to liberty:

A very little part of our life is so vacant from these *uneasinesses*, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good. We are seldom at ease, and free enough from the sollicitation of our natural or adopted desires, but a constant succession of *uneasinesses* out of that stock, which natural wants, or acquired habits have heaped up, take the *will* in their turns. (II.xxi.45)

The stronger ties, we have, to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general . . . the more are we free from any necessary determination of our *will* to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire, set upon any particular, and then appearing preferable good. (II.xxi.51)

In these passages, Locke implies that there is a sense in which an agent might be free *from their desires*. Prima facie, this thought is difficult to square with Locke's own theory of

---

<sup>33</sup> LoLordo emphasizes that Locke takes non-human animals to possess the active power of spontaneous motion. *Locke's Moral Man*, 38–41.

motivation. If all of our actions, including our free actions, are determined by desire, in what sense might an agent nonetheless wish to be free from their desires?

To answer this question, we need to appreciate another aspect of Locke's view. LoLordo observes that there seems to be a close connection for Locke between *liberty* and *the power to determine one's actions through reason*.<sup>34</sup> This connection is clearest in the *Second Treatise*:

The *Freedom* then of Man and Liberty of acting according to his own Will, is *grounded on* his having *Reason*, which is able to instruct him in that Law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will. To turn him loose to an unrestrain'd Liberty, before he has Reason to guide him, is not the allowing him the privilege of his Nature, to be free; but to thrust him out amongst Brutes, and abandon him to a state as wretched, and as much beneath that of a Man, as theirs. (*Two Treatises* II.63, 309)

The connection also comes out in an example that Locke provides of demonstrative reasoning:

*Men shall be punished,—God the punisher,—just Punishment,—the Punished guilty,—could have done otherwise—Freedom—self-determination.* (IV.xvii.4)

Since this is supposed to be an instance of demonstrative reasoning, Locke here posits an intuitive connection between *liberty* (freedom) and *the power of self-determination*: for an agent to possess liberty with respect to some action is for *the agent themselves* to be able to determine *for themselves* whether or not they will perform that action. And, as LoLordo plausibly argues, the power of self-determination is closely connected to *the power to determine one's actions through reason*. Since Locke takes a person to be “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection” (II.xxvii.9), it follows that *reason* is part of the nominal essence of *person*. *Determination by reason* thus qualifies as *self-determination* insofar as, to borrow LoLordo's words, “being guided by reason is being guided by something essential to us, rather than by a fleeting desire or uneasiness.”<sup>35</sup> For Locke, therefore, an agent possesses liberty with respect to some action just in case the agent is able to determine whether or not they will perform that action *through the exercise of their reason*.<sup>36</sup>

This connection between *liberty* and *the power to determine one's actions through reason* helps to explain why Locke maintains (as I argued in §2) that, in order for an agent

---

<sup>34</sup> LoLordo, *Locke's Moral Man*, 47–49.

<sup>35</sup> LoLordo, *Locke's Moral Man*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> LoLordo argues only that *moral agency* requires the power to determine one's actions through reason. It seems to me, however, that LoLordo's own arguments imply the stronger conclusion that liberty itself (and not just moral agency) requires this power.

to be free with respect to some action  $\phi$ , the agent's volition to  $\phi$  must be determined by their judgment:

Every Man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent Being, to be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment, what is best for him to do: else he would be under the determination of some other than himself, which is want of Liberty. (II.xxi.48)

Locke begins this passage by drawing attention to our nature as intelligent beings—that is, beings that essentially possess reason. He then argues that liberty requires determination by “Thought and Judgment” because otherwise we “would be under the determination of some other than [ourselves].” In other words, since we are beings that essentially possess reason and since liberty implies the power of self-determination, Locke concludes that liberty requires that an agent's will be determined by their judgment, since it is only through passing judgment about what to do or about what to pursue that an agent's reason is able to influence their actions.

So, Locke's view thus far is that liberty requires the ability to determine one's actions through reason via the influence of judgment upon the will. Where does desire fit into this picture? Locke's view, recall, is that it is the uneasiness of desire that immediately determines the will (II.xxi.31). Accordingly, just as reason can influence the will only through the mediation of judgment, so too judgment can influence the will only through the mediation of desire. Fortunately, as I noted in §3.1, Locke thinks that there is a very tight connection between judgment and desire: whenever an agent desires some good, Locke maintains that the reason why the agent desires that good is because they judge it necessary for their happiness. So, when all goes well, our actions are determined by our desires, our desires are shaped by our judgments, and our judgments are informed by our reason.

All does not always go well, however. The problem is not that our desires can come apart from our judgments. On the contrary, Locke's view is that we desire all and only those goods that we judge necessary for our happiness. Instead, as I will argue, the problem is that our judgments can come apart from our reason—that is, our desire-determining judgments can sometimes be *irrational*. And, to the extent that our desire-determining judgments can be irrational, there is a danger that we will not be able to determine our actions through reason and therefore that we will not possess liberty. It is this danger, I propose, that underlies Locke's paradoxical claims about desire. Locke remarks, as I noted earlier, that we are seldom able to follow our reason in the pursuit of “remoter absent good” because we are not sufficiently “free” from the “natural or adopted desires” that have been “heaped” upon us by “natural wants, or acquired habits” (II.xxi.45). The problem to which Locke is alluding here, I suggest, is that “natural wants” and “acquired habits” tend irrationally to distort our desire-determining judgments, thus giving rise to “natural or adopted desires” that are not appropriately grounded in reason.

This distortion is perhaps clearest in the case of “natural desires” born of “natural wants.” Consider hunger, for example. Hunger is a feeling of pain or uneasiness. Locke argues that any such pain or uneasiness is “always join'd [with] Desire” because “*desire*

being nothing but an *uneasiness* in the want of an absent good, in reference to any pain felt, ease is that absent good” (II.xxi.31). In other words, the pain of hunger (a natural want) gives rise to a corresponding desire for ease from this pain (a natural desire). Locke takes judgment to play a crucial role in this process. Remember, Locke holds that, whenever an agent desires some good, the reason why the agent desires that good is because they judge it necessary for their happiness. So, if an agent desires ease from the pain of hunger, this must be because they judge it necessary for their happiness.<sup>37</sup> The trouble is that the very experience of pain itself tends to distort our judgments.<sup>38</sup> Locke explains later in the chapter that, due to “*the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds,*” the experience of pain “so takes up the whole Mind, that it scarce leaves any thought of things absent”; consequently, “we desire to be rid of the present Evil, which we are apt to think nothing absent can equal” (II.xxi.64). When I am hungry, for example, this hunger might so absorb my attention that I end up judging that I need to ease my hunger *right now* by eating an entire bag of potato chips, instead of simply waiting for dinner. This judgment is, we can suppose, irrational. If I were more fully to exercise my reason, I would realize that I ought to wait for dinner. The trouble, according to Locke, is that the presence of painful natural wants such as hunger makes such rationality difficult to achieve.

Something similar may happen in cases of “adopted desires” born of “acquired habits.” Locke thinks that acquired habits, like natural wants, also tend to produce a kind of pain or uneasiness:

Habits have powerful charms, and put so strong attractions of easiness and pleasure into what we accustom our selves to, that we cannot forbear to do, *or at least be easy in the omission of* actions, which habitual practice has suited, and thereby recommends to us. (II.xxi.69; my emphasis)

If I’m in the habit of having a piece of chocolate with my afternoon coffee, for example, then I’ll tend to feel uneasy each afternoon until I have my chocolate. This uneasiness is similar to the uneasiness of hunger except that, whereas the uneasiness of hunger arises naturally from the human constitution, my acquired uneasiness is the product of habituation. As a result, acquired habits tend to distort our judgments in precisely the same way as natural wants: when I feel my habitual afternoon uneasiness, this uneasiness (a kind of pain) may absorb my attention in such a way as to distort my judgment, leading me to exaggerate the significance of a tiny piece of chocolate for my happiness.

In other cases, acquired habits may distort our judgments more directly, not by distracting us with habitual pain but more straightforwardly by leading us to form habitual judgments. Locke appeals to habitual judgments in other domains, most

---

<sup>37</sup> Moauro and Rickless helpfully suggest that, whereas desires are “cognitive uneasinesses” that are caused in the mind by evaluative judgments, natural wants such as hunger or thirst are “noncognitive uneasinesses” that are not caused by any evaluative judgment. “Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?” 9

<sup>38</sup> Leisinger, in “Locke’s Diagnosis of Akrasia,” emphasizes this point (9–12).

famously in his account of depth perception: presented with a two-dimensional array of light and colour, “the Judgment presently, by an habitual custom, alters the Appearances into their Causes” (II.ix.8). These habitual judgments belong to a broader category of what Locke calls “Intellectual Habits” (II.xxxiii.17). Locke explains that, sometimes, intellectual habits produce “associations” (II.xxxiii.7) of ideas in which two or more ideas become irrationally connected in the mind through “Chance or Custom” so that “’tis very hard to separate them” even though they have no “natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another” (II.xxxiii.5).<sup>39</sup> In extreme cases, Locke thinks that associations of ideas can constitute madness, as when someone forms the belief that their body is made of glass (II.xi.13). In less extreme cases, Locke suggests that association is also responsible for philosophical dogmatism (II.xxxiii.17). Returning to our case, it seems plausible that intellectual habits might also be responsible for some adopted desires, such as the desires for “*Honour, Power, or Riches*” (II.xxi.45). It is not difficult to imagine that a child raised in privilege might acquire intellectual habits disposing them to judge that riches are necessary for happiness. In this case, their acquired habit of judging that riches are necessary for their happiness would give rise to an adopted desire for riches.<sup>40</sup> Notice that the agent’s judgment in this case would be irrational, since it would arise not from the exercise of their reason but from a socially induced habit. As a result, when the agent acts in the pursuit of riches, they would fail to determine their action through the use of their reason: their action would be determined by their volition, their volition would be determined by their desire, their desire would be determined by their judgment, but their judgment would not be determined by their reason—instead, their judgment would be nothing more than an irrational by-product of their privileged upbringing.

We are now in a position to understand Locke’s paradoxical claims about desire. For Locke, liberty requires the ability to determine one’s actions through reason via the influence of judgment and desire. When all goes well, our actions and volitions are determined by our desires, our desires are shaped by our judgments, and our judgments are informed by our reason. Locke’s worry in II.xxi.45, however, is that many of our desires *are not* appropriately grounded in reason. This is not because desire can come apart from judgment, but rather because our desire-determining judgments can themselves be irrational. When we are in pain, we tend irrationally to judge that ease from

---

<sup>39</sup> Locke explicitly connects the association of ideas with the habitual judgments involved in depth perception in a section on “Association” (§41) in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. See John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 219. For more on Locke’s account of association, see Kathryn Tabb, “Locke on Enthusiasm and the Association of Ideas,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 9 (2018): 75–104.

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, consider Locke’s example in *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (§116) of how children often delight in tormenting small animals, a “habit” that Locke blames upon the pernicious social forces of “custom and conversation”: “By these steps, unnatural cruelty is planted in us, and what humanity abhors custom reconciles and recommends to us by laying it in the way to honor. Thus, by fashion and opinion, that comes to be a pleasure which in itself neither is nor can be any.” John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, 91.

pain is necessary for happiness, even if long-term happiness requires tolerating present pain for future pleasure. And, even when we are not in pain, various habits of thinking acquired through custom and education may lead us irrationally to judge that things like riches, honour, and power are necessary for our happiness, even if true happiness actually lies elsewhere. This is why Locke is so worried about those “natural or adopted desires” that have been “heaped” upon us by “natural wants, or acquired habits” (II.xxi.45). In Locke’s view, such desires pose a threat to our liberty because they are grounded in irrational judgments rather than the exercise of reason.

It is at this point that Locke introduces the power to suspend and examine desire. Instead of simply acting on our natural or adopted desires, Locke explains that we are able to suspend those desires and use our reason to examine whether the “particular, and then appearing preferable good . . . has a tendency to, or be inconsistent with our real happiness” (II.xxi.51). This exercise of reason, in turn, may “raise our desires” (II.xxi.46) for those goods that we judge to be genuinely necessary for happiness. The power to suspend and examine desire is thus an essential link between action, volition, and desire on the one hand and reason on the other: at least in many cases, we are able to determine our actions through reason *only because* we are able to suspend and examine our desires. Without the power to suspend and examine desire, therefore, we would seldom be free because our actions would be determined not by our reason but by natural and adopted desires born of irrational judgments. It is for this reason that Locke proclaims the power to suspend and examine desire to be “the source of all liberty” (II.xxi.47).

In fact, this final proclamation may be somewhat hyperbolic. Two sections earlier, Locke is more circumspect, writing instead that our natural and adopted desires leave “*a very little part of our life . . . so vacant from these uneasinesses*” and that “*We are seldom at ease, and free enough from the sollicitation of our natural or adopted desires*” (II.xxi.45; my emphasis). These passages leave open the possibility that we may experience some fleeting moments of calm in which our judgments are not clouded by natural wants or acquired habits and, consequently, in which the power to suspend and examine desire may not be necessary for liberty. The important point, however, is that these moments are, indeed, fleeting. Most (if not quite all) of the time, liberty *does* require the power to suspend and examine desire. The power to suspend and examine desire might thus more accurately be termed the source of *almost* all liberty.

This is a significant concession. At the beginning of this section, I set out to argue that the power to suspend and examine desire is *necessary* for liberty. At this point, however, I am claiming only that the power to suspend and examine desire is *practically* necessary for liberty *most of the time* for *beings like us*. Is this concession simply defeat by another name? I don’t think so. What this concessions helps to underscore, I believe, is that Locke is talking about a very human kind of liberty. After all, God and the angels (those “*superior Beings*” of II.xxi.49) presumably do not need the power to suspend and examine desire in order to determine their actions through reason. The same might be said of a human sage, whose desires are naturally responsive to the dictates of reason. Such a demi-God would not need the power to suspend and examine desire in order to be determined by reason because their desires would already accord with reason. These examples show that it is, in some sense, possible that an agent might be able to determine



their actions through reason even without the power to suspend and examine desire. Locke isn't talking about sages, however, let alone about God or angels—he's talking about ordinary adult human beings like you and me. The sage does not suffer from "*the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds*" that causes us to desire the removal of present pains even at the expense of greater future pleasures, nor is the sage deluded by the "acquired habits" that make us "itch after *Honour, Power, or Riches*" (II.xxi.25). As a result, while the example of the sage might demonstrate the barest possibility of attaining liberty without the power to suspend and examine desire, this possibility is unattainable for ordinary human beings. Practically speaking, it is *not* possible that we could determine our actions through reason without the power to suspend and examine desire, at least in the overwhelming majority of cases.

To summarize, then, Locke conceives of liberty as the power of self-determination, that is, the ability to determine one's own actions. And, given the close connection between selfhood and reason, Locke understands the power of self-determination as the power to determine one's actions through reason. Locke recognizes, however, that the judgments and desires that determine our actions often are not appropriately responsive to reason. As a result, if we were unable to suspend our desires, examine their objects, and thereby endeavour to ground our desire-determining judgments more fully in reason, we would rarely if ever be able to determine our actions through reason and, therefore, would rarely if ever possess liberty. It is in this sense, for Locke, that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty, because it is virtually always required in order for beings like us, with all of our irrational proclivities, to be able to determine our actions through the exercise of reason.

### 5. Liberty and Suspension: A Reconciliation

Let's return to the question of how to reconcile Locke's claims about the power to suspend and examine desire with his account of liberty in II.xxi.8. If Locke does take the power to suspend and examine desire to be necessary for liberty, then why doesn't he say so when he presents his account of liberty in II.xxi.8?

I think that the answer to this question is more or less the same as the answer that I gave earlier to a similar question. In §2, I argued that Locke takes liberty to require determination by judgment. In §3.2, I then considered why Locke doesn't mention judgment explicitly in his II.xxi.8 account of liberty. My answer was that, when Locke presents his account, he is *assuming* that we always will in accordance with judgment. This is not because Locke takes it to be conceptually impossible for an agent to will some action in the absence of or contrary to judgment. On the contrary, Locke seems to think that that is precisely what happens in the case of mad men and fools. Instead, Locke assumes that we always will in accordance with judgment because, when Locke offers his account of liberty, he isn't talking about mad men and fools. Instead, he's talking about *us*—the (in Locke's view) ordinary adult human beings who make up the *Essay's* presumed readership. I now want to suggest that much the same is true of the power to suspend and examine desire. When Locke offers his account of liberty in II.xxi.8, he is assuming not only that the agent's will is determined by their judgment but also that they

possess the power to suspend and examine desire. In offering this account, Locke isn't commenting on the status of beings who lack the power to suspend and examine desire, no more than he is commenting on the status of mad men and fools who act without judgment.

My proposal, therefore, is that Locke already takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be implicit in his II.xxi.8 definition of liberty. Take another look at how Locke first defines liberty in II.xxi.8:

So far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man *Free*. (II.xxi.8)

In II.xxi.8, Locke is defining what it is for a “Man” to be free. The category of *man* does not include all agents whatsoever. Instead, it encompasses only Locke and his presumed readers—roughly, ordinary adult (male?) human beings. It does not include, for example, fools or mad men (or children or animals).<sup>41</sup> As a result, when Locke offers his definition of liberty in II.xxi.8, he takes for granted certain facts about the subjects of liberty—specifically, that their will is determined by their judgment and that they possess the power to suspend and examine desire.

As the chapter progresses, however, Locke begins to examine the presuppositions built into his II.xxi.8 account of liberty. He asks what determines the will (II.xxi.29) and then, after distinguishing the ideas of will and desire (II.xxi.30), argues that desire determines the will (II.xxi.31), that we desire whatever we judge necessary for our happiness (II.xxi.43), and therefore that we often do not desire the greater apparent good (II.xxi.44). This more careful examination of the will leads Locke to worry that desire might pose a threat to liberty (II.xxi.45), which motivates Locke to introduce the power to suspend and examine desire (II.xxi.47). This line of thought culminates in II.xxi.50, in which Locke revisits his earlier account of liberty:

That in this state of Ignorance we short-sighted Creatures might not mistake true felicity, we are endowed with a power to suspend any particular desire, and keep it from determining the *will*, and engaging us in action. This is *standing still*, where we are not sufficiently assured of the way: Examination is *consulting a guide*. The determination of the *will* upon enquiry is *following the direction of that Guide*: And he that has a power to act, or not to act according as such determination directs, is a *free Agent*. (II.xxi.50)

In this passage, Locke echoes his earlier definition of liberty as the power to act or not to act “according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is prefer'd to the other” (II.xxi.8). Locke now clarifies, however, that the relevant “determination or thought of the mind” is a “determination of the *will* upon enquiry.”

---

<sup>41</sup> See also the preceding section, in which Locke explains that “every one” forms the idea of liberty “From the consideration of the extent of this power of the mind over the actions of the Man” (II.xxi.7).

Liberty thus requires not merely that we be able to act or not to act *as we will* but, moreover, that we be able to inform our volitions through “enquiry”—that is, *examination*—and that we be able to make room for enquiry through *suspension*. In other words, Locke is now *restating* his II.xxi.8 definition of liberty, but this time making it clear that the power to suspend and examine desire is indeed necessary for liberty. What Locke now realizes is that certain facts about the subjects of liberty that he had been taking for granted in II.xxi.8 are, in fact, *essential* to liberty. We would *not* be free without the power to suspend and examine desire.

Here is another way to put the point. Consider the formalization of Locke’s account of liberty that I presented back in §1:

An agent S is free with respect to some action  $\phi$  if and only if (i) S is able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  and (ii) S is able not to  $\phi$  if they will not to  $\phi$ .

Strictly speaking, if the variable ‘S’ in this formalization is taken to range over all agents whatsoever, then this formalization fails to capture Locke’s view. My claim is that Locke *does not* take ‘S’ to range over all agents whatsoever. Instead, Locke takes ‘S’ to range over only *ordinary adult human beings* (as Locke conceives of them). If we read the formalization as restricted in this way, then I believe that it does capture Locke’s view. After presenting this account of liberty in II.xxi.8, Locke goes on to examine the motivational psychology of those ordinary adult human beings who feature as the subjects of his account of liberty. What Locke discovers is that some psychological features of ordinary adult human beings are, in fact, essential to liberty: the agent *would not* be free if their will were not determined by their judgment or if they lacked the power to suspend and examine desire. As a result, we may rewrite our formalization of Locke’s account of liberty in such a way as to capture these discoveries without altering its substance:

An agent S is free with respect to some action  $\phi$  if and only if (i) S is able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$ , (ii) S is able not to  $\phi$  if they will not to  $\phi$ , (iii) S’s will is determined by their judgment, and (iv) S possess the power to suspend and examine desire.

The reason why this revised formalization does not differ substantively from the original is because the agent was assumed all along to satisfy the added conditions (iii) and (iv). The revised formulation merely makes these additional conditions explicit.

It is true that Locke repeats his II.xxi.8 definition of liberty *after* introducing the power to suspend and examine desire in II.xxi.47: liberty is “a Power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing as we *will*” (II.xxi.56) or “a power to act or not to act according as the Mind directs” (II.xxi.71). Why doesn’t Locke offer more precise definitions of liberty in these later sections, making it explicit that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty? The answer, I believe, is that, in those later sections, Locke is *summarizing* his earlier discussion. And, in each case, Locke’s summary has the same structure as that earlier discussion: it begins with Locke’s initial definition of liberty before going on to discuss the determination of the will and then the power to suspend and examine desire. This structure is particularly clear in II.xxi.71, which begins with the

claim that “*Liberty* is a power to act or not to act according as the Mind directs” but ends with the realization that an agent “could not be *free* if his *will* were determin’d by any thing, but his own *desire* guided by his own *Judgment*,” where it is clear in context that the relevant “guidance” is that of suspension and examination. Locke’s summary thus traces the same path as the chapter as a whole, from the initial definition of liberty with its implicit presuppositions to an explicit realization that the power to suspend and examine desire is necessary for liberty. As a result, far from undermining my interpretation, I think that II.xxi.71 (and, to a lesser extent, II.xxi.56) actually helps to confirm my overall reading of the chapter.

Before concluding, let me return to the comparison with Stuart’s interpretation that I drew in §4.1. Stuart and I agree that the power to suspend and examine desire is already “built into” Locke’s definition of liberty in II.xxi.8. We offer different accounts, however, of *how* it is built in. I have argued that it is built in because Locke restricts his account of liberty to *ordinary adult human beings* and, consequently, takes it for granted that subjects of liberty possess the power to suspend and examine desire. By contrast, Stuart argues that it is built in because Locke restricts his account of liberty to *agents* and maintains that the power to suspend and examine desire is required for agency. As I argued earlier, I think that the main problem with Stuart’s interpretation is that there is no reason to attribute to Locke a thick conception of agency that requires the power to suspend and examine desire. More generally, however, I think that Stuart’s interpretation gets the point exactly backwards. Locke is well aware that there are some agents who lack the power to suspend and examine desire. When Locke offers his definition of liberty in II.xxi.8, however, Locke is discussing the subset of agents who *do* possess the power to suspend and examine desire. As a result, it is true *for that subset of agents* that liberty is the power to perform or forbear some action depending on whether they will to perform or forbear that action, but this is only because that subset of agents is already assumed to possess the power to suspend and examine desire—an assumption that Locke will go on to make explicit later in the chapter. Stuart is thus right to read Locke as restricting his definition of liberty to apply only to beings who possess the power to suspend and examine desire, but wrong about the source of that restriction.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In closing, let’s return to the case of the kleptomaniac stealing the necklace. I noted earlier that the kleptomaniac possesses freedom of action because they are able either to steal or not steal, as they will. And yet, supposing that the kleptomaniac suffers from an unsuspend-able psychological compulsion, it seems that they are not truly free. I think that Locke is sensitive to this worry and that this is why he introduces the power to suspend and examine desire. In Locke’s view, if we were unable to suspend and examine desire, then we would all be like the kleptomaniac most (if not all) of the time because we would not be “free . . . from the sollicitation of our natural or adopted desires” (II.xxi.45).

I have argued for two controversial claims in this paper. First, I have argued that Locke does not identify liberty with freedom of action. In order for an agent to be free with respect to some action  $\phi$ , Locke thinks that the agent must satisfy certain further

conditions in addition to (i) being able to  $\phi$  if they will to  $\phi$  and (ii) being able *not* to  $\phi$  if they will *not* to  $\phi$ . One such condition is that the agent's volition must be determined by their judgment. I have also argued, second, that another such condition is that the agent must possess the power to suspend and examine desire. Without this power, the agent's volitions and actions would be determined (largely if not exclusively) by "natural or adopted desires" born not of reason but of irrational judgments distorted by "natural wants" and "acquired habits" (II.xxi.45). In such cases, we would not be free because we would not be able to determine our actions through the exercise of reason. It is in this sense that Locke takes the power to suspend and examine desire to be "the source of all liberty" (II.xxi.47).<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> This paper has been somewhat long in the making. A distant ancestor was presented at the 2014 Locke Workshop at Yale University organized by Ken Winkler, under whose supervision I first began to develop these ideas. Special thanks are due to several anonymous referees for *Locke Studies*, whose robust criticism fostered what are, I hope, significant improvements.

## Bibliography

- Aaron, Richard I. *John Locke*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Casson, Douglas John. *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke's Politics of Probability*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Chappell, Vere. "Locke on the Suspension of Desire." In *John Locke: An Essay concerning Human Understanding in Focus*, edited by Gary Fuller, Robert Stecker, and John P. Wright, 236–48. London: Routledge, 2000.
- . "Power in Locke's *Essay*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"*, edited by Lew Newman, 130–56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Colman, John. *John Locke's Moral Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983.
- Darwall, Stephen. *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought': 1640–1740*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Davidson, Jack D. "Locke's Finely Spun Liberty." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2003): 203–27.
- Garrett, Don. "Liberty and Suspension in Locke's Theory of the Will." In *A Companion to Locke*, edited by Matthew Stuart, 260–78. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.
- Glauser, Richard. "Locke and the Problem of Weakness of Will." In *Mind, Values, and Metaphysics: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Kevin Mulligan*, edited by Anne Reboul, 483–99. Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 2014.
- . "Thinking and Willing in Locke's Theory of Human Freedom." *Dialogue* 42, no. 4 (2003): 695–724.
- Leisinger, Matthew A. "Locke's Diagnosis of Akrasia." *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–13. <http://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.105>.
- Locke, John. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- . *The Correspondence of John Locke*. 8 volumes. Edited by E. S. De Beer. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–1989.
- . *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. Edited by Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.

- . *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- LoLordo, Antonia. *Locke's Moral Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . “Reply to Rickless.” *Locke Studies* 13 (2013): 55–64.
- Losonsky, Michael. “Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment by Peter Schouls.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (1995): 293–314.
- Lowe, E. J. *Locke*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- . *Locke on Human Understanding*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Mabbott, J. D. *John Locke*. London: Macmillan Press, 1973.
- Magri, Tito. “Locke, Suspension of Desire, and the Remote Good.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000): 55–70.
- Mattern, Ruth. “Locke on Active Power and the Obscure Idea of Active Power from Bodies.” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 11, no. 1 (1980): 39–77.
- Moauero, Leonardo, and Samuel C. Rickless. “Does Locke Have an Akrasia Problem?” *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–13. <http://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.39>.
- Rickless, Samuel C. *Locke*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- . “Locke on Active Power, Freedom, and Moral Agency.” *Locke Studies* 13 (2013): 33–54.
- . “Locke on Freedom.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N Zalta. Stanford University, 1997–. Article published November 16 2105; last modified January 21, 2016. Accessed February 17, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/locke-freedom>.
- . “Review of Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency, by Gideon Yaffe.” *Locke Studies* 1 (2001): 235–55.
- Schouls, Peter A. *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Stuart, Matthew. *Locke's Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Tabb, Kathryn. “Locke on Enthusiasm and the Association of Ideas.” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 9 (2018): 75–104.

- Tully, James. *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Walsh, Julie. "Locke's Last Word on Freedom: Correspondence with Limborch." *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 4 (2018): 637–61.
- Walsh, Julie, and Thomas M. Lennon. "Absential Suspension: Malebranche and Locke on Human Freedom." *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.31>.
- Weinberg, Shelley. *Consciousness in Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Yaffe, Gideon. *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Yolton, John W. *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the 'Essay'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.