22 Locke, *Essay* II.xxi.1-5,7-11,13-15,22-25,29-33,40-48,51-53,56 Power

Locke's chapter on "power" is actually on the topic of freedom of the will. The chapter opens with a brief (and problematic) discussion of the origin of the idea of power but quickly moves, via the claim that our only clear idea of power arises in connection with our idea of the power of will to initiate motion, to an examination of the notions of will (also called volition), freedom (also called liberty), necessity (or determination), desire, choice, and moral responsibility and blameworthiness for action. The story Lock had to tell is a complex one that moves over successive stages. On the way, the argument makes a U-turn. Over its initial stages it introduces the notions of will, volition, freedom, and necessity and builds to the conclusion that the will is not free but determined by whatever causes the greatest sense of uneasiness (something that is carefully distinguished from the greatest good). But then, in its later stages, the argument changes direction. (Interestingly, the change in direction only occurred in later editions of the Essay and was not present in the first.) Locke went on to claim that we have a power to refrain from acting in order to spend time thinking about which of our actions are conducive to the greatest good. This contemplation can alter our state of uneasiness, making us more uneasy about the absence of a more remote good than we are about some immediate cause of distress. Locke proceeded to introduce a secondary sense of liberty of will arising from the exercise of this power. And he tried to argue that the ability to use the power to suspend action pending further deliberation makes us morally responsible for some of our actions and justly punishable for some of our misdeeds. The outcome was an argument for a more robust version of "soft determinism" than is found earlier in Hobbes or later in Hume. Locke did not just appeal to his definitions of freedom and will and say that even though all actions are determined, some are voluntary because determined by the will even though the will is itself determined. He tried to show that the person has powers that can occasionally suspend determination of the will and so provide occasion for alternative determination. Failure to exercise those powers when the occasion arises makes people culpable and justly punishable for their misdeeds. The precise details of this highly nuanced position, the extent to which it successfully provides for a sense of freedom of the will while recognizing determinism, and even the extent to which it is deterministic, remain controversial.

OUESTIONS ON THE READING

- 1. Is the idea of power a simple or a complex idea?
- 2. What gives us our clearest idea of a power to begin motion?
- 3. What is will?
- 4. What makes an action voluntary or involuntary?
- 5. Why can beings that have no will not be said to be free? Why can beings who have will and who are doing what they will nonetheless be said to be necessitated?
- 6. Explain the difference between the power of will and the power of liberty.
- 7. What determines the mind to will what it does?
- 8. What is required for a great good to determine the will?
- 9. What is the source of what is improperly called free will and of such liberty as we have?
- 10. What causes us to be able to suspend desire pending due examination of what is most conducive to our real happiness?



11. Why is it that we do not all always act in such a way as to obtain real happiness?

NOTES ON THE READING

Power. Locke considered the idea of power to be a simple idea that can be acquired from either sensation or reflection (II.vii.8, II.xxi.3), but it is far from being so. As explained in II.xxi.1 the idea of power is the idea of the possibility of either undergoing or bringing about change. The former is "passive" power, the latter "active" power. These are hardly simple ideas. They involve, first, the idea of change, which in turn involves not just the idea of a relation of succession between different ideas, but the idea of a single thing to which the successive ideas somehow belong. This means that the ideas of identity of a thing over time and unity of different features in one thing must be involved in the idea of power. But there is more to the ideas of active and passive power than just that of change. As Locke was careful to specify, these ideas also involve the notion of possibility. Passive power is not change but a *capacity* to undergo change — something that may exist as a mere possibility. For example, wax has a passive power to change from being yellow to being white even if it is not actually changing right at this moment. This power exists in it as a kind of enduring possibility, which we describe as a capacity or disposition. Similarly, active power is not change but an ability to bring about change. It, too, is something that exists as a kind of enduring possibility. We think, for example, that the sun has a power or ability to bleach wax, even if it is not at the moment shining on a piece of wax. Moreover, it seems to have been part of Locke's view that active power can exist and be exercised but fail to produce any result. I have a power to straighten my arm, but not every exercise of that power is efficacious (if I have just done 50 push ups, and go to do a 51st, I may try, but not succeed). So active power involves possibility in the sense of only being able to bring about change in those cases where it is not resisted, either by an incapacity to undergo change in the thing acted on (e.g., an incapacity in my arm to do a 51st push up), or by some other active power working differently on the thing.

Importantly, in the case of active power in particular there seems to be something more involved than just change and possibility. Active power involves the further notion of causality. Active powers are thought of as things that contain something that makes change occur in things that have a capacity to undergo those changes.

By treating this bundle of highly sophisticated notions a "simple" idea, Locke was pulling the wool over people's eyes. He was suggesting that this very complex notion is an idea we can get directly and immediately simply by attending to what is given in sensation or reflection, as we get our ideas of red, perception, and number simply by attending to what is given in sensation or reflection. Others have not agreed, particularly as concerns the crucial notion of an active ability to make change happen. Hume was later to mount a powerful challenge to this presumption. All that immediate experience ever tells us, Hume charged, is that one simple idea occurs after another. A broader survey of many experiences might tell us that simple ideas of a certain sort are always followed by simple ideas of another sort. But experience never reveals anything in the earlier sort of idea that accounts for why the later sort of idea follows. It never reveals any real power in the earlier sort of idea that makes the later sort of idea occur or any real power outside of the two that makes them occur in succession.

Locke went at least part way to recognizing Hume's position when he mulled over the possibility that we might not in fact be able to obtain the idea of active power from sensation (II.xxi.2, 4, 72). His chief reason for supposing that we do in fact have an idea of active power was that we get it when we reflect on our abilities to direct our thoughts and move our bodies. When I



try to play a game of chess in my head or go to move my arm, I have a certain kind of thought, which we might refer to as a decision that is intimately bound up with an effort. In many cases (though not all) this decision and effort is immediately followed by the emergence of the intended idea or motion. That, Locke claimed, gives us our clearest idea of active power. Hume would have objected. He would have charged that we actually get two or maybe three ideas: the idea of a decision or determination, the idea of a feeling of effort or strain, and the impression of a change in our ideas or of a motion of our limbs. We might discover that ideas of the last sort regularly follow upon the occurrence of ideas of the former two sorts, but we never have anything that gives us an idea of what makes the latter sort of idea follow from the former sorts. Thus we never actually have an idea of power. Locke in contrast, seems to have simply taken it for granted that we cannot experience a change without thinking that some power is responsible for that change. "... whatever Change is observed, the Mind must collect a Power somewhere, able to make that Change ..." (II.xxi.4). Hume might have responded that this is tantamount to invoking an innate idea, since the notion of a "power able to make a change" is not anything we discover, even in our reflections on our own acts of decision and effort. Locke's best defence might have been to try to claim that we actually feel power in ourselves when we go to change our thoughts or move our bodies, but as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, Hume had excellent reasons for denying that we feel any such thing.

Will and volition. Be this as it may, Lock seems to have thought that reflection gives us a simple idea of a power in ourselves to bring about changes in our thoughts and motions in our bodies. He referred to this power as "will" or "volition" (he used the terms interchangeably) and those actions arising from it as voluntary. Not all our thoughts or body motions are voluntary. Sensations, particularly sensations of pain, are most often involuntary. We can simply will to think about what we want, but we cannot simply will to see or feel what we want. Motions of the heart and digestive system are likewise involuntary, as are the motions of the limbs when we are thrown or fall. Only those thoughts and motions brought about by the power of will are voluntary, not those brought about by other powers.

But which thoughts and motions are those? Locke's position seems to have been that we are aware, through reflection, of exercising the power of will. What you do through exercising that power is voluntary. What you do through exercising (or being acted upon by) other powers is involuntary.

The awareness of the power of will takes the form of the awareness of a thought of a certain kind. Earlier I characterized it as a decision combined with an effort to bring about what was decided. Locke spoke of directives and commands and preferences, but he at one point warned his reader that,

Ordering, Directing, Chusing, Preferring, etc. which I have made use of, will not distinctly enough express *volition*, unless [you] will reflect on what [you yourself] do, when [you *will*]. For Example, *Preferring* which seems perhaps best to express the Act of *Volition*, does it not precisely. For though a Man would prefer flying to walking, yet who can say he ever *wills* it? [II.xxi.15 abridged out of Winkler's edition]

To order or direct that an action occur is one thing, and to perform that action is something else. For Locke, the will is not merely a power to express a preference or give a command (as it is for Descartes). It further involves the *effort* to execute that preference or demand. But this is not to



say that the will is always successful. In the best cases, what is willed follows "barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering" (II.xxi.5) that it occur. In these cases, the will can be compared to something divine. God is supposed to have said, "Let there be light," and light is supposed to have come to be as an inexorable and necessary effect of his mere command that it be so. The will is like this when it works. Barely by a command, it makes a thought arise or a limb move. But in other cases (e.g., those Locke instanced at II.xxi.9-10, 13, and 48) the command that the will has over our thoughts and body motions may be less efficacious or even totally ineffective. This is only to be expected, since unlike Descartes, who was invested in saying that the power of the will is infinite (and therefore took it to consist merely in the power to choose, not to act on what was chosen), Locke considered powers to be things that can only *possibly* bring about their effects and that are therefore limited. Though will is a power to bring about changes in thought and move the body, it is a power that can fail to bring about its intended effect.

Freedom and liberty. The fact that will is a power that can fail to bring about its effect led Locke to introduce the notion of what he liked to call a further power, the power of freedom or liberty (the terms are again used interchangeably). I say "liked to call" because, as it is described, freedom looks more like a state in which the power of will can be exercised than a separate power in its own right. These appearances notwithstanding, Locke was invested in considering freedom to be a separate power from the power of will for reasons that will be mentioned below.

For Locke, you are free when (i) your willing to perform an act (including an act of refraining from doing something) is by itself sufficient to make that act occur, but also (ii) had you willed not to perform that act, your will would also have been by itself sufficient to make that act not occur. If either of these conditions is not satisfied, you are not free but necessitated. This means that free actions have to be willed. The motions of a tennis ball are not free because, even though a tennis ball can be considered to have the power to either move or be at rest, the tennis ball does not will those motions. The motions of someone who trips and falls are not free either, because even though the person has will, their will is to do the opposite, and not fall. But the definition of freedom also entails that actions that are willed are not necessarily free. Just because you will to do something, and your willing it alone is able to make that thing happen, that doesn't make you free. It also has to be the case that had you willed not to perform the action, your bare act of willing it would have been able to prevent the action. To cite Locke's example, a person who stays in a locked room because they want to be there is not free because even though they stay in the room voluntarily (as a consequence of willing to do so), they could not leave the room were they to have that contrary volition.

It follows from this that the distinction between the voluntary and involuntary action does not fall in line with the distinct between free and necessitated agents. You perform an act voluntarily if you will to perform it. But you are only free if you would have been able not to perform it had you willed not to perform it. Some acts can be voluntary even though the agent is necessitated to perform them.

Free will. The way Locke defined it, freedom has to do with what happens consequent upon an exercise of will. Regardless of how you come to will what you will, you are free as long as your willing it is all that it takes for the action to occur and had you not willed it, that would have sufficed for the action not to occur. This account of freedom sidesteps the question of how we come to will what we will, and so sidesteps the question of whether the will itself might be free.



Locke went on to consider that question and to claim that the will could not be free. He backed this rejection of free will up by claiming that the will is one power that an agent can have whereas freedom is a different power that an agent can have and that powers can only be ascribed to agents, not to other powers. This is not an easy argument to understand. One problem with it is that, the way Locke described it, freedom seems more like being in the state where contrary powers can be exercised rather than a power in its own right. If freedom is a power, then it is not obvious what it is a power to do, and how it differs from the power of will. Fortunately, Locke's position can be defended just by considering how he described freedom, without having to appeal to his further claim that it is a power.

On Locke's account, an agent, A, is free to perform an act, X, if and only if

- (i) if A wills to perform X, then X occurs just for that reason, and
- (ii) had A instead willed not to perform X, then X would not have occurred just for that reason.

Note that this definition makes reference to the will. If reference to the will is involved in stating what freedom is, then attempting to take freedom to be a feature of the will can be expected to produce some sort of nonsense. This means that we can't take the act of willing to be among the acts that can be considered to be free, at least in the sense in which Locke has defined freedom. To see why, consider what filling in "willing" for X in the definition of freedom produces:

- (i) if A wills to will, then willing occurs just for that reason, and
- (ii) had A instead willed not to will, then willing would not have occurred just for that reason.

According to the definition of freedom, if either one of these two clauses is not satisfied, freedom is not present. But the second clause (at least) cannot be satisfied. Refraining from willing is impossible, as Locke argued over II.xxi.23-24. I can refrain from *acting*, but I cannot refrain from willing. When someone suggests that I do something I must necessarily will to jump right to it, or not will to jump right to do it. But to not will to jump right to it is to hold yourself back, that is, to will to refrain from doing it, at least for the moment. The option of not willing either way is just not there. Even turning your attention away and considering something else is a form of holding yourself back and so willing to refrain.

It might be objected that Locke tried to pull a fast one here. The question is not whether we are free to *will* or not, but whether we are free to choose what to will — whether we are free to will either to do X or to refrain from doing X. To his credit, Locke did not neglect this question. But he did think that it still does not make any sense to talk about being free to will to do or not do something. This is because we still need to understand freedom in conformity with the definition. According to the definition, an agent who performs the act of willing to do X could do so freely if and only if

- (i) if A wills to will to perform X, then willing to perform X occurs just for that reason, and
- (ii) had A instead willed not to will to perform X (i.e., willed to will to refrain from performing X), then willing to perform X would not have occurred just for that reason.

And this, Locke charged (II.xxi.25), precipitates a vicious regress. If you have to will to will before you can will freely, then you have to will to will before you can will to will freely, and so on. (On the other hand, if you can't will to will freely, then your willing can't be free, either.)



All the same, we might wonder whether free will might not make sense in some other sense of "freedom" than the sense Locke laid out. One such sense would be the sense of being free from determination. Might the will have an absolute power of choice, that allows it to spontaneously decide on one course of action or the opposite, regardless of what inclinations or motives may be operating on it?

Locke had no sympathy for this view. His most powerful argument against it, offered over II.xxi.48, is that even were it possible it would constitute a defect. On his view, our wills ought to be determined by what makes us uneasy, especially as informed by a full understanding of the ultimate consequences of the different courses of action open to us. To the extent that they are not in conformity with what we understand and feel, they are something foreign to us, that rebels against our judgment. As he put it, someone who rests a hand on a table and has the power to either lift it if he wills to do so or let remain at rest if he wills not to raise it, is considered to be at liberty and (in Locke's sense) to be free. This is something we consider to be a good thing and a proof of a degree of power that the person has. But when you bump the application of the notion of freedom back from the act of moving to the act of willing the motion, and consider the person to have complete freedom to either will or not will to raise the arm regardless of the circumstances (to be perfectly indifferent to raising the arm even if an object is flying towards their face and they need to raise the arm to protect themselves) — then you consider the person to have something wrong with them. My will does what I judge is the right thing to do, and what I judge is the right thing to do is a matter of what I understand and what uneasiness I feel and not something that my will ought to be able to spontaneously disregard.

Uneasiness. Supposing that the will cannot be free, it becomes a question what determines it. Locke's answer was that the will is determined by the desire for happiness. (This answer is confused by II.xxi.30, where Locke declared that desire should not be confused with the will and that will and desire can run counter to one another. He should be understood to have meant that while the will is not the same as desire, desire does determine the will. Cases in which desire runs counter to will are actually cases in which one desire runs counter to the desire that does determine the will. Locke's own example, of someone who is compelled to persuade a second person to do something the first person doesn't want them to do, is an example of one desire, to avoid reprisal, determining the will contrary to another desire, for someone else to not do what they are being asked to do.)

When writing the first edition of the *Essay* Locke had presumed that the desire for happiness takes the form of a desire for the greatest good, or at least what is perceived to be the greatest good at any given moment. But he changed his mind in later editions, claiming that a person may perceive something to be the greatest good, and openly acknowledge it to be such, and still not will to act to obtain that good. Locke speculated that this is because the desire for happiness takes a different form, the form of a desire to remove whatever is currently causing us to feel most uneasy. We are, after all, more concerned to remove pain. Seeking pleasure or the greatest good takes second place to that occupation. Accordingly, we only act to obtain goods insofar as the absence of those goods becomes a source of uneasiness, indeed, the source of our greatest current uneasiness. However great a good may be known to be, if its absence does not bother someone, they won't act to obtain it. And if obtaining it, when its absence causes no uneasiness, would require doing things that are difficult or painful, then a person will certainly not act to obtain it, because the thought of the difficulty and pain produces uneasiness which they will act to avoid by avoiding the pursuit of



the good thing. Locke speculated that this is why we feel hunger and thirst and lust. Food is pleasurable to eat. But the thought of the pleasure to be obtained by eating does not drive us to eat as effectively as hunger, which is a felt uneasiness at the absence of food.

The doctrine of suspension. Up to this point, Locke's discussion of the power of will has proceeded directly to a "soft determinist" conclusion. The will is not free. It is instead determined by desire, specifically the desire to eliminate sources of uneasiness. The notion of freedom nonetheless makes sense. Agents act freely when their actions are caused by their wills, as opposed to some other cause, and it is further the case that had they willed to do the contrary they would have been able to do so. Of course, since their wills are determined, they could not possibly have willed to do any otherwise than they did in fact will to do. But we can still consider whether any special obstacles would have prevented them from performing a contrary action had they, contrary to fact, been determined to willed, and declare them to be free simply because the sole determining cause of their action was their will.

However, in later editions of the *Essay* Locke changed direction, and began to speak of another kind of liberty that precedes the determination of the will and of factors that allow us to antecedently influence how our wills are determined. In one paragraph (56) he even declared that there are cases where we are at liberty with respect to willing. It remains a controversial matter whether these innovations entail abandoning soft determinism in favour of the rival, libertarian position on free will.

The ground for making the change was laid when Locke shifted from taking the will to be determined by the perception of what we take to be the greatest good to taking it to be determined by the most pressing source of uneasiness. Making this shift led him to declare that we do not always or even mostly act to obtain the greatest good, and that our desires are not proportioned to the value of the goods we seek. But it also led him to note that if something really is a great good then, when we contemplate it, and think of the pleasure it can bring us, we can be led to become uneasy as a consequence of its absence — perhaps so uneasy that we will be motivated to act to obtain it.

This means that contemplation can alter the strength of the uneasinesses we feel and so alter the determination of the will, bringing it about that we do in fact most desire what is most good for us.

To the extent that he recognized this possibility, Locke was not yet moving out of the ambit of a soft determinist account of the will. Many determinists have recognized that the will is not just determined by desire, but by an understanding of what is most conducive to achieving what we most desire. But they have taken this understanding itself to be determined by experience and to be merely one factor, that mixes with desires roused by passions and others sources, in the determination of the will.

Locke took a different tack. He maintained that while desire determines the will, we know from experience that it is often possible for us to, as he put it, "suspend the satisfaction" of a desire prior to the moment when it has determined the will. It is important not to confuse the ability to suspend desire with willing not to will, which Locke earlier dismissed as impossible. Suspending desire is something more like willing to think about something other than that desire. Supposing that we can do this, at least some times (at II.xxi.53 Locke recognized that in some cases the desire is just too strong to allow this), it gives us time to contemplate the various uneasinesses we are experiencing and the various goods we might obtain by our actions. This contemplation could give



rise to desires for absent great goods and an uneasiness over their absence strong enough to alter the way our wills would have been determined had we not engaged in contemplation. Obviously, we would end up acting wisely or prudently rather than on impulse.

The necessity of pursuing happiness. Locke maintained that the ability to hold a desire in suspense in order to contemplate other goods is the foundation of a kind of liberty — the liberty to be determined by the understanding rather than by impulse. And he often spoke as if this is something that we can simply choose to do, at least on some occasions, and as if a failure to exercise this choice when it is available makes us culpable for our misdeeds.

These are problematic claims. If will just is the power to think or refrain from thinking, as Locke earlier defined it, then a power to hold off from thinking about a desire would itself have to be an effect of the will. But if the will is determined, then we should not to be able to simply choose whether or not to suspend our desires.

To get around this difficulty, Locke claimed that our wills ought to be necessitated or determined by the desire to seek true happiness. (Earlier, he claimed that they are determined by the most pressing uneasiness, but let's set that aside for the moment.) The desire for true happiness makes us anxious not to make mistakes — in particular, not to make the mistake of satisfying a particular, immediate desire at cost to our true happiness. This in turn makes us cautious and makes us form a higher-order *desire* to suspend thinking of our more immediate desires pending due contemplation of the consequence of our actions.

I just mentioned that, earlier, Locke said that our wills are determined by the most pressing uneasiness. If they are to be determined instead by the desire for true happiness, that desire needs to be cultivated to the point where the risk of losing true happiness becomes our most pressing uneasiness. To do that, we need to will to turn our thoughts to identifying greatest goods and contemplating their advantages so that we will desire them.

But the will is determined by desire.

It is hard to read Locke's chapter on power without feeling as if you are being spun around on a merry-go-round. First we are told that the will is determined by desire. But then we are told that we can suspend desire. Except suspending desire requires an act of will, directing that we think of something else. That requires a higher-order desire, the desire for true happiness. But because the most pressing uneasiness determines the will, a desire for true happiness will not determine the will to suspend other desires unless we cultivate it to the point where we become so uneasy about not satisfying it that it is our greatest uneasiness. Doing this requires yet another act of will, this time a will to focus our thoughts on things that will make us truly happy. At this point, however, Locke may have thought that the circle is broken. This is because a yet higher order desire to cultivate a desire for true happiness is, on the one hand, such a remote and abstract desire, and on the other such an obviously worth while one, that it shouldn't interfere with our more immediate projects. We merely need to remember the importance of the activity, and we can perform it at those times when we are not distracted by more pressing uneasinesses. Our frequent moments of leisure ought to allow us the time to cultivate the desire for true happiness and so make ourselves able to subsequently suspend attention to other desires pending due contemplation. The only residual problem is why we do not all do this. How is it that so many of us end up making bad choices?

Bad choice and moral blame. One cause of bad choice is the strength of the uneasiness motivating the will to make it. In these cases, where the person feels strong pain or intense passion,



Locke considered that bad choice might be excusable. But in other cases bad choice is a consequence of laziness. Though we are able to, we simply do not make the effort to cultivate a desire for what we understand to be a great good (through, say, forming habits). Or we simply do not make the time to think about what sorts of things would be really good, even though we have the leisure to do so. Locke claimed that in these cases we are justly blamed for our bad choices. We even blame ourselves for them.

It remains questionable whether this position on moral blameworthiness is consistent with Locke's theory, nuanced though it is. If we are lazy or distracted, it is, on his own account, because some pressing uneasiness determines the will and makes us unwilling to cultivate a desire for what we understand to be a great good or to investigate which goods are better than others. It remains unclear that anyone really has a power to do anything other than what they did, on Locke's account. And because that it is the case, it remains unclear whether anyone can justly be blamed for anything.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- 1. Was Locke able to successfully distinguish the power of freedom from that of volition? Is his treatment of these notions ultimately coherent?
- 2. Does Locke's account of volition differ from Descartes's? If so, how? If not, what is the common position of the two on the nature of the will and what is the textual basis for attributing this position to each?
- 3. Assess the adequacy of Locke's reasons for denying freedom of the will.
- 4. Was Locke ultimately able to reconcile determinism of the will with moral responsibility and blameworthiness?
- 5. Compare Locke's and Hobbes's views on the nature of the will and the possibility of freedom of the will.